Missing page
Inside front cover

Western Trails

MESQUITE MUZZLES

Great "Bert Little" Novel

By

CLYDE A. WARDEN

Nov '31

"We can't get Married Until-"

"WE CAN'T get married until I can earn more money." Thousands of young men are saying that today. Thousands of girls are giving that as the reason the marriage date is being put off and off. Sometimes it gets a little embarrassing, too, to have to keep on giving that excuse. *For no girl likes to admit that the man she is going to marry is a failure!*

It takes money to support a home these days. And you're right in waiting. But don't wait too long. The years of youth are precious years. Once gone, they will never return.

Thousands of men have happy, prosperous homes because they had the foresight to prepare themselves for advancement through the home-study courses of the International Correspondence Schools. Hundreds of them report salary increases of $10, $15, and $25 a week. Many are earning $75, $100 and $150 a week. Some have doubled and even tripled their salaries. Some are earning $10,000 and $15,000 a year. Others have become owners of businesses of their own.

If the I. C. S. can help other men to raise their salaries, it can help you. At least find out how. It won't obligate you to ask for our Free Booklets, but that one simple act may change your entire life. Do it now. Do it for HER!

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"The Universal University"
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Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X:

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SIX-GUN STORIES OF THE REAL WEST

Western Trails

A. A. WYN, Editor

VOL. X NOVEMBER, 1931 No. 1

Every Story Complete—No Serials!

Mesquite Muzzles (Novel) . . . . . **Clyde A. Warden** 8

Bert Little took a strange partner on the trigger trails of Texas. This newcomer was a lad whose courage was on the run—a boy whom other boys bullied. And then in a storm of thundering sixes, Bert Little showed him how to find himself!

Cowhide Savvy . . . . . **Stephen Payne** 38

Young Mace Bronson wasn't up to the latest Colt tricks—but he sure did savvy cowhide stunts!

Lazy Link, Lead-Master (Novelet) . . . **R. Craig Christensen** 49

Up from the border country came easy-going Lazy Link Kilgore. And his six-irons were easy, leaving their holsters—when outlaws and city gangsters stacked themselves against a lone girl!

Cactus Courage . . . . . **Forbes Parkhill** 73

Jaddo Braggs had some dream. It gave him a lump on his head—and a devil of a time explaining it!

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"First sheriff of the Old West."

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Jim Farrell waited for the showdown in Wolf's place. They would come—all three at once. Then Wolf set up his ace-in-the-hole—and the Montana foothills rumbled with the steel throats of vengeance!

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Take a look-see, folks. Here's a string of tophands.

Pen Pards 104

Get yourself a writing pal.

Fowl Play . . . . . **Joe Archibald** 105

Walrus and Wishbone had to beat a slick jasper's racing roosters—or stretch hemp. So Wishbone decided to enter two hawgs against the roosters—and made a strange wager.

Winners of Loco Cartoon No. 14 117

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Trails to the Best Story Corrals.

Stampede . . . . . **Powder River Bill** 119

Where our reading and writing waddies fan their tongues.

Cover by Delos Palmer, Jr. ***Story Heads by W. M. Allison***

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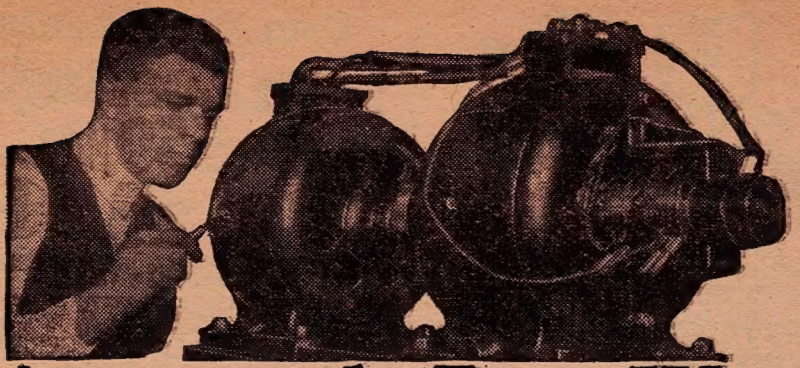

Amazingly Easy Way to get into ELECTRICITY

Don't spend your life waiting for $5 raises in a dull, hopeless job. Let me show you how to prepare for a real job and how to make real money—in ELECTRICITY, the live, money-making field. Getting into Electricity is far easier than you imagine!

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Come to Coyne in Chicago and learn Electricity the quick and practical way—**by actual shop work** on actual machinery and equipment. No useless theory! The average time to complete the course is only 12 weeks. You work on real dynamos, switchboards, armatures, auto and airplane engines, transmitting stations, etc.—everything from door bells to power plants—in full operation every day! No previous experience necessary.

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Here are a few of the splendid positions open to Trained Electrical Men:

Power Plant Operator	$40 to $60 a week
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Contractor — Dealer	$3,000 to $10,000 a year
Motor Inspector	$200 to $300 a month
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FREE Employment Service to Students

When you graduate, we'll do all we can to help you get the job you want. We employ three men on a full time basis whose sole job is to help secure positions for our students. Also we'll help you to earn while learning. Some of our students pay a large part of their living expenses through part-time work we get them.

NOW IN OUR NEW HOME

This is our new fireproof, modern home wherein is installed thousands of dollars' worth of Electrical equipment of all kinds. Every comfort and convenience has been arranged to make you happy and contented during your training.

COYNE Is 32 YEARS OLD

Thirty-two years is a long time. No school or business could continue that long unless it were rendering real service and getting real results. Yet Coyne has been located right here in Chicago since 1899. Coyne Training is tested — proven by hundreds of successful graduates.

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"One week after graduating, I started my electrical job," writes Leland Hinds of Indiana. "After graduating I was home only two days when appointed Engineer in a light plant in South Dakota," writes George Bagley, of Canada. "Two weeks after graduating I received a splendid job. The main consideration given my application was that I was a Coyne Trained man," reports Harold Soucy of Illinois. "I wish to thank your Employment Manager for securing this position for me," writes Albert Yagon, "he sent me out to this Company the first day and I was employed there immediately." And I could go on quoting from hundreds of letters of successful Coyne Trained Men. What they have done, you should be able to do!

Get The Facts

But get all the facts! You can find out everything absolutely free. JUST MAIL THE COUPON BELOW FOR A FREE COPY OF OUR BIG ELECTRICAL BOOK, telling all about jobs . . . salaries . . . opportunities. This does not obligate you. JUST MAIL THE COUPON!

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
H. C. LEWIS, President
509 S. Paulina Street, Dept. S1-41, Chicago, Ill.

Mr. H. C. LEWIS, President
Coyne Electrical School, Dept. S1-41
509 S. Paulina Street, Chicago, Illinois

Dear Mr. Lewis:
Without obligation send me your big free catalog and all details of Free Employment Service and how I can "earn while learning."

Name.....

Address.....

City.....*State*.....

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for MEN and WOMEN

Age Range, 18 to 50

INSIDE or OUTSIDE WORK—LOCAL or TRAVELING

OVER 900 DIFFERENT KINDS of POSITIONS AVAILABLE

If you want a steady Government Position, where strikes, hard times, politics, etc., will not affect you, where you draw twelve months' pay every year, and when you become old retired on a pension the balance of your life, get on Uncle Sam's Payroll. Stop worrying, enjoy life. Pick the position you want, it belongs to you just as much as to anyone else. Why not get it? It is all up to you! The positions described in this announcement are only a few of the many desirable and obtainable. Fill out the coupon below, mail it today and full particulars will be sent immediately.

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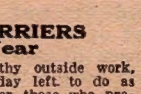
Government Secret Service Work is one of the most fascinating branches of the Service. These positions located throughout the country are both traveling and stationary. Salaries up to $5,000 yearly, and all traveling expenses paid while on the road.

OUTDOOR POSITIONS



Ideal, healthy, fascinating employment, where you can enjoy the forests, plains, and mountain trails, sunshine, and pure air. Duties are patrolling our borders, delivering mail on rural routes, and in cities and towns, etc.

RURAL AND CITY CARRIERS $1400 to $3000 Year

The Rural Mail Carrier has easy, healthy outside work, short hours, with a large part of the day left to do as he pleases. Thousands of city positions for those who prefer inside work, delivering mail in office buildings. These positions open to both country and city people.

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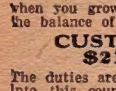
This is interesting work. Farmers, butchers, or anyone with a knowledge of live stock, food products, meats, etc., are in line for one of these positions. Salaries and promotions splendid. Both men and women are eligible.

RAILWAY MAIL CLERK $1850 to $2700 Year



These positions are both traveling and stationary. When traveling you receive an extra allowance when away from home more than ten hours; and when you grow old you are retired with a comfortable pension for the balance of your life.

CUSTOMS INSPECTORS $2100 Year to Start

The duties are to check and inspect goods brought into this country, levy the duties, etc., and see that Customs regulations are not violated. This is very fascinating work with splendid salaries.

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Send me immediately FREE, full particulars about positions marked "X." Also your big list of other positions obtainable, salaries, locations, how to qualify, opportunities, etc.

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Over the Mountains from Los Angeles 559 Miles on 11 Gallons of GAS

Think of it! FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY-NINE MILES over rough mountainous country burning only ELEVEN GALLONS OF GASOLINE. Imagine more than FIFTY MILES TO THE GALLON. That is what the WHIRLWIND CARBURETING DEVICE does for D. R. Gilbert, enough of a saving on just one trip to more than pay the cost of the Whirlwind.

THE WHIRLWIND SAVES MOTORISTS MILLIONS OF DOLLARS YEARLY

Whirlwind users, reporting the results of their tests, are amazed at the results they are getting. Letters keep streaming into the office telling of mileages all the way from 22 to 59 miles on a gallon, resulting in a saving of from 25% to 50% in gas bills alone. Mark A. Estes writes: "I was making 17 miles to the gallon on my Pontiac Coupe. Today, with the Whirlwind, I am making 35 5-10 miles to the gallon." P. P. Goerzen writes: 34 6-10 miles with the Whirlwind, or a gain of 21 miles to the gallon."
R. J. Tulp: "The Whirlwind increased the mileage on our Ford truck from 12 to 26 miles to gallon and 25% in speed."
Car owners all over the world are saving money every day with the Whirlwind, besides having better operating motors. Think what this means on your own car. Figure up your savings—enough for a radio—a bank account—added pleasures. Why let the Oil Companies profit by your waste? Find out about this amazing little device that will pay for itself every few weeks.

FITS ALL CARS In just a few minutes the Whirlwind can be installed on any make of car, truck or tractor. It's actually less work than changing your oil, or putting water in the battery. No drilling, tapping or changes of any kind necessary. It is guaranteed to work perfectly on any make of car, truck or tractor, large or small, new model or old model. The more you drive the more you will save.

SALESMEN AND DISTRIBUTORS WANTED To Make Up to $100.00 a Week and More

Whirlwind men are making big profits supplying this fast selling device that car owners cannot afford to be without. Good territory is still open. Free sample offer and full particulars sent on request. Just check the coupon.

GUARANTEE No matter what kind of a car you have—no matter how big a gas eater it is—The Whirlwind will save you money. We absolutely guarantee that the Whirlwind will more than save its cost in gasoline alone within thirty days, or the trial will cost you nothing. We invite you to test it at our risk and expense. You are to be the sole judge.

FREE OFFER COUPON

WHIRLWIND MFG. CO.
Dept. 641-A, Station C., Milwaukee, Wis.
Gentlemen: You may send me full particulars of your Whirlwind Carbureting device and tell me how I can get one free. This does not obligate me in any way whatever.

Name .....

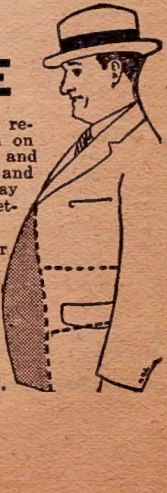
Address .....

City .....

County ..... State .....

Check here if you are interested in full or part time salesman position

Inches Off WAISTLINE



Director Belt gets at fat and quickly removes it by gentle massage-like action on the abdomen, causing fat to be absorbed and eliminated. Thousands have proved it and doctors recommend it as a natural way to reduce. Stop drugs, exercises and dieting. Try this easy way.

SENT ON TRIAL Let us prove our claims. We'll send a Director for trial. If you don't get results you owe nothing. You don't risk a penny. Write for trial offer, doctors' endorsements and letters from users. Mail the coupon NOW!

LANDON & WARNER
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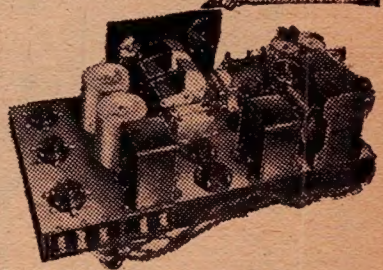
I will train you at home to fill a BIG PAY Radio Job!

I will give You my new 8 OUTFITS of RADIO PARTS for practical, Home Experiments

You can build over 100 circuits with these outfits. You build and experiment with the circuits used in Crosley, Atwater-Kent, Eveready, Majestic, Zenith, and other popular sets. You learn how these sets work, why they work, how to make them work. This makes learning at home easy, fascinating, practical.

Back view of 5 tube Screen Grid A. C. set—only one of many circuits you can build.



Here's Proof

If you are earning a penny less than $50 a week, send for my book of information on the opportunities in Radio. It is free. Clip the coupon NOW. Why be satisfied with $25, $30 or $40 a week for longer than the short time it takes to get ready for Radio?

Radio's growth opening hundreds of $50, $75, $100 a week jobs every year

In about ten years Radio has grown from a $2,000,000 to a $1,000,000,000 industry. Over 300,000 jobs have been created. Hundreds more are being opened every year by its continued growth. Many men and young men with the right training—the kind of training I give you—are stepping into Radio at two and three times their former salaries.

You have many jobs to choose from

Broadcasting stations use engineers, operators, station managers and pay $1,200 to $5,000 a year. Manufacturers continually need testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, service men, buyers, for jobs paying up to $7,500 a year. Shipping companies use hundreds of Radio operators, give them world-wide travel with board and lodging free and a salary of $80 to $150 a month. Dealers and jobbers employ service men, salesmen, buyers, managers, and pay $30 to $100 a week. There are many other opportunities too.

So many opportunities many N. R. I. men make $200 to $1,000 while learning

The day you enroll with me I'll show you how to do 10 jobs, common in most every neighborhood, for spare time money. Throughout your course I send you information on servicing popular makes of sets; I give you the plans and ideas that are making $200 to $1,000 for hundreds of N. R. I. students in their spare time while studying. My course is famous as the course that pays for itself.

Talking Movies, Television, Aircraft Radio are also included

Special training in Talking Movies, Television and home Television experiments, Radio's use in Aviation, Servicing and Merchandising Sets, Broadcasting, Commercial and Ship Stations are included. I am so sure that I can train you satisfactorily that I will agree in writing to refund every penny of your tuition if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service upon completing.

64-page book of information FREE

Get your copy today. It tells you where Radio's good jobs are, what they pay, tells you about my course, what others who have taken it are doing and making. Find out what Radio offers you, without the slightest obligation. ACT NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute Dept. 1MA2
Washington, D. C.

$100 a week

"My earnings in Radio are many times greater than I ever expected they would be when I enrolled. They seldom fall under $100 a week."
E. E. WINBORNE,
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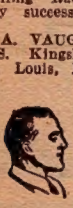
Jumped from $35 to $100 a week

"Before I entered Radio I was making $35 a week. Last week I earned $110 servicing and selling Radios. I owe my success to N. R. I."
J. A. VAUGHN
3715 S. Kingshighway,
St. Louis, Mo.



$500 extra in 6 months

"I find I made $500 from January to May in my spare time. My best week brought me $107. I should have taken it long ago."
HOYT MOORE
R. R. 3, Box 919,
Indianapolis, Ind.

I am doubling and tripling the salaries of many in one year and less Find out about this quick way to BIGGER PAY

Radio Needs Trained Men

FILL OUT AND MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 1MA2
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Send me your free book. I understand this request does not obligate me and that no salesman will call.

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ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

Lifetime Employment Service to all Graduates

You get PROOF the first 7 Days I can make YOU a NEW MAN

CHARLES ATLAS

Holder of the title: "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

As He Is Today

I'VE helped thousands of men—young and old—underweight and overweight—weaklings and even "strong men" and other physical directors who wanted MY KIND of Muscle Power. Now I'll show YOU my quick, sure way to build yourself a new body and make "A NEW MAN" of yourself.

Spending just a few minutes a day in your own home, doing what I tell you, without tricky apparatus, starving or gorging, using only my *natural* methods of *Dynamic-Tension*—in ONE WEEK you begin to SEE and FEEL the difference in your bodily condition and physical appearance.

Besides adding INCHES of powerful, fast muscles to your chest, arms and wherever needed, my methods will dig down into your system, banishing such ailments as constipation, pimples, skin blotches and the others that do you out of the good things and good times of life. If you're timid and bashful, you lose all that—you have a new, more forceful personality—you become a NEW MAN!

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"Everlasting Health and Strength"

Do what my thousands of other pupils did—send for a free copy of my 48-page book "Everlasting Health and Strength." Spend 2c to mail my coupon—to learn how YOU can win the biggest prize in life—a handsome, healthy, husky body. Address CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 10H, 133 East 23rd Street, New York City.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept 10H,
133 East 23rd Street, New York City.

I want the proof that **Dynamic-Tension** will make a **New Man** of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book. **"Everlasting Health and Strength."**

Name .....

Address .....

City and State .....

(Please print or write plainly)

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Giving Away SHIRTS · TIES · UNDERWEAR · HOSIERY!

Give Free Merchandise and *Get* Cash Profits on First Calls!

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Here's Your Opportunity

Accept this free golden invitation to represent Carlton Mills — nationally known Men's Wear manufacturers — and a leader in the direct-to-wearer field. Schooling or training unnecessary. Doesn't cost you a penny so cash in on our series of free merchandise offerings. Note the panels to the right and you'll understand why they're irresistible.

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NEW BIG KIT FREE

Coupon below Starts You

Send for New Fall Outfit. Also details of extra $25.00 Cash Bonus and 40% Profit Sharing plans. All are easy for Carlton Representatives. Rush coupon today!

CARLTON MILLS, Inc.
79 Fifth Ave., New York

MAIL *this* COUPON

Mr. Mandel, President, **Dept. 512-P**
Carlton Mills, Inc., 79 Fifth Ave., New York

Dear Mr. Mandel: I know I can give away Free Shirts, Ties, Underwear and Hosiery. Send sample outfit Free. I'm ready for big pay . . . and cash profits on first calls.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Why waste time on *old fashioned methods*

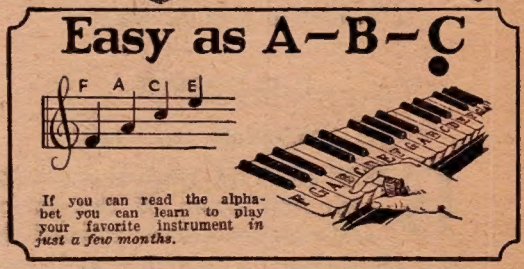
—when you can learn to play at home without a teacher

DON'T let the thought of long years of tiresome practice scare you away from learning to play! Don't let the thought of an expensive private teacher keep you from letting your dreams come true! For you—*anyone*—can easily *teach yourself* to play—right in your own home, in your spare time, and at only a fraction of what old, slow methods cost!

It's *so* easy! Just look at that sketch at the right. The note in the first space is *always* f. The note in the second space is *always* a. The way to know the notes that come in these four spaces is simply to remember that they spell *face*.

Now, isn't that simple? You don't have to know one note from another in order to begin. For the U. S. School way explains everything as *you go along*—both in print and picture—so that, almost before you know it, you are playing *real tunes and melodies* right from the notes.

You simply *can't go wrong*. First you are *told* what to do, then the picture *shows* you how to do it—then you do it yourself and *hear* it. No private teacher could make it any clearer.



If you can read the alphabet you can learn to play your favorite instrument *in just a few months.*

Easy as A-B-C

No wonder over 600,000 men and women have learned to play this easy way! For this famous course is based on sound, fundamental musical principles, highly simplified. It's not a "trick" or "stunt" method. You learn to play from notes, just as the best musicians do. You learn to pick up any piece of music, read it, and understand it.

No time is wasted on theories. *You get all the musical* facts. You get the real meaning of musical notation, time, automatic finger control, harmony.

You'll find yourself studying the U. S. School way with a smile. Your own home is your studio. The lessons come to you by mail. They consist of complete printed instructions, diagrams, all the music you need. There are no dry-as-dust exercises to struggle through. Instead, it's just like playing a game—you learn so fast!

Choose Your Course

Piano	Piccolo
Organ	'Cello
Violin	Sight Singing
Drums and Traps	Ukulele
Guitar	Hawaiian Steel Guitar
Mandolin	Clarinet
Harp	Flute
Cornet	Saxophone
Trombone	
Voice and Speech Culture	
Harmony and Composition	
Automatic Finger Control	
Piano Accordion	
Italian and German Accordion	
Banjo (Plectrum, 5-String or Tenor)	
Juniors' Piano Course	

No Talent Needed

Forget the old-fashioned idea that you need "talent." Just read the list of instruments in the panel, decide which one you want to play, and the U. S. School of Music will do the rest. And remember—no matter which instrument you choose, the cost in each case will average just the same—only a few cents a day.

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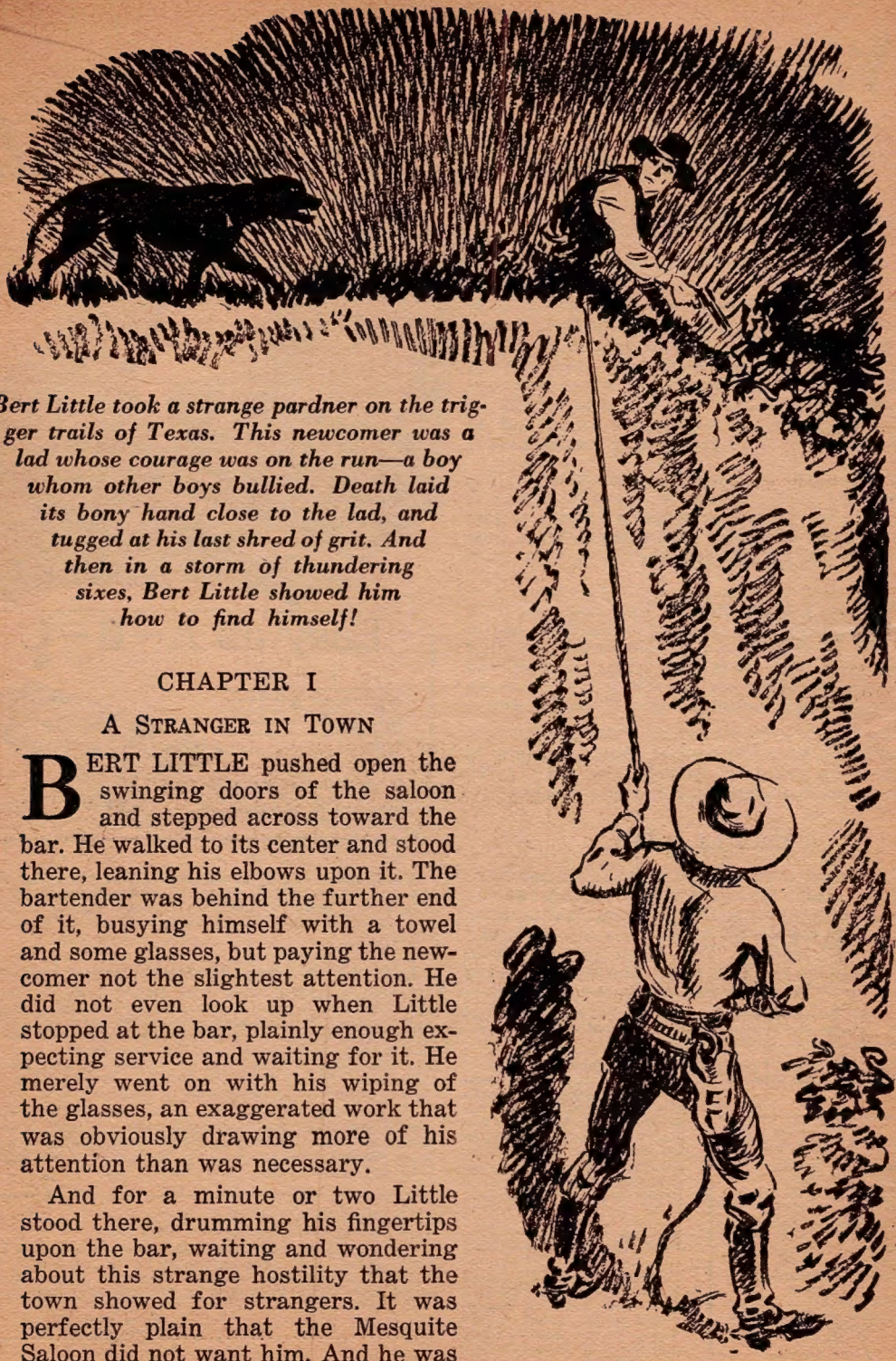


Bert Little took a strange pardner on the trigger trails of Texas. This newcomer was a lad whose courage was on the run—a boy whom other boys bullied. Death laid its bony hand close to the lad, and tugged at his last shred of grit. And then in a storm of thundering sixes, Bert Little showed him how to find himself!

CHAPTER I

A Stranger in Town

BERT LITTLE pushed open the swinging doors of the saloon and stepped across toward the bar. He walked to its center and stood there, leaning his elbows upon it. The bartender was behind the further end of it, busying himself with a towel and some glasses, but paying the newcomer not the slightest attention. He did not even look up when Little stopped at the bar, plainly enough expecting service and waiting for it. He merely went on with his wiping of the glasses, an exaggerated work that was obviously drawing more of his attention than was necessary.

And for a minute or two Little stood there, drumming his fingertips upon the bar, waiting and wondering about this strange hostility that the town showed for strangers. It was perfectly plain that the Mesquite Saloon did not want him. And he was being given his invitation to leave.

When he was sure of this fact, Little stepped from the bar. But he

Mesquite Muzzles

Complete "Bert Little" Novel

By CLYDE A. WARDEN

Author of "Lead Harvest," "Valley of Silent Sixes," etc.

did not turn toward the door. Instead, he swung about and strode slowly toward the point of the bar behind which the bartender was standing. And as he neared the man, his strange and grim half-smile settled upon his lips.

But Phillips, the bartender, did not look up even then from his wiping of the glasses. The only change about him when he saw Little coming was the tightening and bulging of the heavy roll of fat at his jowls.

Little came to the end of the bar. He stopped there and looked into the smug, weak-featured face of Phillips.

"Friend," said he, "I'm a stranger here in your town of Mesquite."

At that the bartender looked up, and for a moment a greasy smile played across his fat, sleek face. But Little saw no mirth in that brief, soft smirk.

"Yes," said Phillips, "you're a stranger in Mesquite."

"I dunno much about how the things are run here."

"Yes. An' you dunno the ways of the town," the bartender agreed.

"Well," said Little, with his faint, strange half-smile, "I'm here at the end of a long trail. There's been dust

Little knew that Buck's leap would be as swift as a bullet. There was nothing to do—but wait!

an' sun aplenty in those miles. There's been enough to burn a man pretty deep, my friend. You'll think of shady forests and see the sparkle of a cool runnin' creek, when you're crossin' the dry heat of a desert. Aye, an' now I'm here at the end of that trail. An' I find that I've dropped into a queer sort of a town."

"Why d'you come here to Mesquite?" asked Phillips, as cold and as hard as ever. His fat, sleek face was void of all emotion. He merely looked at Little as if he were looking at a wall and expected to find nothing there of interest.

"Is there a reason why I shouldn't?" asked Little slowly, eyeing the bartender steadily.

"Yes," said Phillips stolidly, "there is! There's plenty of reasons why you shouldn't have come here."

"Well, then, mebbe you can tell me some of them. Mebbe you could even tell me what's ailin' this here town of yours."

"Mebbe I could," admitted the bartender, wagging his bullet head upon his round shoulders until the rolls of fat on his short neck shook and quivered. "Mebbe I could do that. But I reckon that I ain't goin' to. You see, stranger, it's this way with me. I do a lotta talkin', an' the first thing I do is get myself all tangled up in trouble. So I ain't gunna say a thing about Mesquite or about anything else around here. I'm gunna keep shut an' stay shut outta trouble. That's the way a man can live to a ripe old age."

"All right," smiled Little, shortly. "You do that. You keep a close mouth an' you'll never be sorry for it. But set me out a drink here an' I'll get the dryness outta my throat. Aye, an' we'll let Mesquite an' its troubles rest."

"That's another thing, stranger," said Phillips, smiling again his mirthless smirk, "that can't be done. I got nothin' here that you want. I got nothin' for you."

Those words of the bartender were the strangest that Little had ever heard. It was the queerest turn of events that he had yet met with in this town of queer men. And he had not the slightest doubt that the man meant every word of it. There was cold seriousness and a veiled hint of malice in the eyes and on the fat face of the bartender. But even then Bert Little did not lose his patience. He only smiled a trifle stronger and leaned in a more comfortable position upon the bar.

"Those are strange words an' strong words," he said, gently. "I reckon you've gotta sound reason for sayin' them. Aye, an' are ready to show that reason. Otherwise, I reckon I'll be forced to come back there an' help myself to what I want. D'you see, friend?"

"You'd take it upon yourself to do a thing like that, would you?" said a rough and slurring voice at Little's elbow.

LITTLE turned slowly. He swung about and looked into the face of a towering bulk of a man who had come up as silently as a soft-footed cat to his side. He was slouched there with one elbow slightly upon the edge of the bar, smiling in a sneering sort of way at Little. But Little met him eye for eye without so much as the quiver of an eyelash.

"You'd even go behind the bar an' get it for yourself?" the man repeated. "I reckon you're a rank outsider to use talk like that. Such a thing, it ain't done in Mesquite, my friend."

"In Mesquite, a lotta things need changin'," said Bert Little, slowly. "Aye, an' when a man's dry, I reckon he'd do a lot to get a drink of water, even. I aim to drink here; or I aim to find out the reason against it."

"Mebbe you're wantin' a drink," said the man. "An' mebbe you'll be gettin' what you want. But you gotta take a longer ride yet this day to get it. Mesquite is full, d'you see? We ain't wantin' no other men to come in here. An' we ain't lettin' them stay. We

mind our own business here in this town. We're wantin' nobody to butt in. An' we don't allow it. D'you begin to see, stranger?"

"Aye," said Bert Little. "I reckon I begin to see. A man's told he's gotta ride on an' put Mesquite behind him, or else he's handed a piece of lead for a present. Is that right?"

"That's pretty near right," said the man. "An' can you guess who it is that hands him that piece of lead?"

"Well, I reckon I could come pretty close," Bert Little answered, looking the man squarely in the eye. "An' I'd say that the bullet would strike him in the back, from the looks of the men I've seen here."

Following that there was a heavy and tense silence. The face of the big man darkened with rage. His lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl. But with an effort, he controlled himself.

"For a stranger in town, you're usin' strong words, my friend," he rasped, his lips curling with his seething rage. "Men have been killed for less."

"For sayin' what they can see?" said Little, softly, and with his strange half-smile stealing briefly over his face.

The room had become silent and tense. Not a man of the half dozen there rose or stirred from his chair. But suddenly, the big man at the side of Little stood erect. He dropped his hands in a ready, threatening manner to his belt.

"I've stood enough of this," said he, harshly. "An' now you an' me, we're gunna get down to business. Who are you, stranger? What's your name?"

"My name?" smiled Bert Little. "Well, I reckon that ain't necessary. You can call me anything you like, my friend."

Little was wondering on this strange conversation. He was wondering about the way the town had received him, and about the point this man was driving at. But still with his elbows upon the bar, he stood there and waited for what was to come.

"All right," said the man. "Whatever your name, I reckon it don't matter. But what brings you here to Mesquite? Why are you here?"

"I reckon there was no reason for me to turn aside an' miss it," said Little.

For a moment the man was silent. He ran his eyes over Little from head to foot, as if he was trying to estimate him and find what danger might come from him. Then he seemed satisfied, for he leered with a wolfish twist of his mouth.

"I'm askin' you straight out, stranger," he snarled, "are you a lawman?"

"Am I a lawman?" repeated Little, smiling slightly. "Well, mebbe I am. What difference would that make to you, or to Mesquite?"

"Are you here after Coswell? Speak up, man. An' speak up quick!"

The man's voice had lowered to a mere thread. It came no louder than a tense whisper and it seemed that every man in the room was leaning forward in his chair and hanging on what answer Little might make. But Little only leaned there upon the bar, as steady and as quiet as ever.

"Coswell?" said he at last. "I dunno. Mebbe." A slight smile of amusement was upon his bronzed face. "What has Coswell been doin'?"

"You're askin' me that?" A sneer was in the voice of the man. His lips curled.

"Aye," said Little. "That's what I'm askin'."

"An' you figger I'll tell you anything? *You! A Ranger!* A yellow-livered lout that's gotta hide behind his star. Well, you've come to the wrong town for that, mister. A lawman, he don't mean nothin' in this here town. A star, it's thought about as much of as a mangy dog is. Now I'm askin' you once more if you're gunna ride outta Mesquite while you still got the chance. Or have I gotta plant you here?"

"I reckon," said Bert Little, with his brief and grim half-smile, "that you're only wastin' your breath. I've gotta habit of ridin' where an' when I want."

"You mean you're aimin' to stay on here in Mesquite?" snarled the big man. "Is that it? You're callin' my hand, are you?"

"You put it like that," said Little, slowly, "an' I reckon that's about what it amounts to."

"That's final?"

"Aye, that's final," said Little.

"Then here's the end of the trail for you!" cried the man. And his hand swept gunward.

IT SEEMED that he had all the advantage. He was standing clear of the bar and his hand had been but a scant six inches from his gun butt. He had all the odds in his favor, while Bert Little seemed heavily handicapped. At the moment that the flashing draw of the big man started, Little still leaned against the bar with his arms folded upon it. But then, even as the man's gun was jerked from its holster, the thunder of a heavy weapon shattered the silence of the room.

It had happened so swiftly that not a man had been capable of following it with a clear eye and a calm mind. Like the flickering of a darting shadow, Bert Little had leaped back and along the remaining length of the bar to its end. And now he stood there, with a thin spiral of smoke curling from the muzzle of one of his long-barreled guns, and with the other trained unwaveringly upon the crowd. It was a thing to take the heart from even the strongest. Such dazzling speed was a thing impossible. Yet there it had happened; and Mesquite found for the first time that one of its men could be beaten.

For a split part of a second, the big man stood there beside the bar. His eyes were wild and vacant. His mouth had sagged loosely open. Already, he was in the hands of death, for there in the very center of his forehead a dark blotch had appeared. Midway up with the gun, his hand had frozen. Then the fingers spread like claws and the gun clattered to the floor. He wavered there for an instant. Then he lurched sideways against the bar, and spinning on, fell heavily to the floor.

Still the silence of the room was unbroken. It seemed that black magic had laid its hand upon the room, and had wiped away the odds from one of its two principal players, giving them, instead, to the other. For only magic could have changed the scene so quickly and so thoroughly.

Little stood there at the end of the bar, smiling his grim half-smile. One gun he held upon Phillips, the bartender. And with the other he kept the men of the room in their places.

"All of you saw it happen," said Little, in a slow, calm voice that cut the men like a whip lash. "You saw that he asked for what he got. An' now, lemme tell you gents something. There's eleven more slugs of lead in these guns of mine. They'll all do as much damage as the first did. Now if there's any one of you, or even two, that want to take this thing up, they can step right out here an' say their piece."

His slow, calm voice filled the room with a strange and solemn strength. Here was the man who a few minutes before had seemed to be standing at the very door of death. And standing there without the ghost of a chance. But with startling swiftness that scene had changed, and now he faced them like a tiger. And the greatness that ebbed and flowed from him held them frozen into silence. Not a man moved or lifted a hand to accept his challenge. No man dared hardly breathe. And over the face of Bert Little crept his strange smile.

"I dunno how many of you were the friend of this man," said he. "Mebbe all of you. So I'm gunna have to ask each of you to give up your guns. Throw them there by the door an' I'll pick them up. Your belts, too. It's best to leave you no shells. If a man is given

a temptation, he most always makes a try at it. Aye, so I'm givin' you the chance to end this day with your lives. You hadn't better overstep that chance."

He swung his eyes to Phillips, the fat and now trembling bartender. He waved a gun at him.

"I'm still as dry as ever, my friend," he said. "Is there something you can do about it? No, just water. Clean, cold water, my friend. There's nothin' like it to cut the dust from your throat. That's fine, an' I'm thankin' you."

He drained the glass, and another. Then he walked to the doorway, where the guns and belts lay in a pile. He picked them up and again his eyes went over the group of men.

"I'm leavin' now," he said. "But I'm gunna stay in your town a time yet. There's something about it that I like. Set like you are, gents, an' don't move. Mebbe I'll see you again." With that he turned and was gone.

CHAPTER II

The Challenge

SOMEHOW Little seemed to know that he would not be followed from the saloon, for once he had stepped out of the door and down to the sidewalk he did not even turn to look back at it. And it was true that not one of the men had a thought of finding a gun and rushing out after him. They had seen a sample of how he could deal with trouble, and they were not anxious to press themselves forward into the limelight. These men were not looking to be heroes, even in the eyes of the great Lafler Coswell. They thought first of their own safety. And that one thought was enough to stop them from following after Little.

So he went, undisturbed, to the hitching rail. And with the half dozen gun belts hooked over the pommel, he untied the reins of the stallion and lifted himself up into the saddle. Then he swung the mount around and turned down the center of the empty street, in the opposite direction from which he had entered the town.

He had no direct plan ahead of him. He was in a strange position in a strange town. So the first thing he decided on was learning more about his surroundings. And so he went down the center of the street with his eyes and his ears alert. The stallion stepped smoothly along, his head thrown high, his giant strides lifting and setting down his hoofs with a silken gentleness. And Buck, the great dog, trotted alongside, pausing every moment or two to sniff the air with uplifted head and ears alert. It was as if he, too, sensed a strangeness about the town that spoke of danger; and he was on watch for it.

In that manner they went down the street. From either side Little felt eyes peering out at him and following him along. And he knew that already the news of that thundering shot in the Mesquite saloon had traveled. By this time every person in town would know what had happened and would think that he was a Ranger on the trail of Coswell. And if there were many friends of the dead man among those silent watchers, he knew that trouble might overtake him. But with never a glance to the right or left, he rode on down the street.

Here was a part of the town that he had not seen before. The business buildings had fallen behind him. The street ahead rose to the top of a sloping hill and when he had climbed halfway up it, he could see that the homes of the townsmen were spread like a fan over its face. From the doorway of every house a man could stand and look down upon the flat tops of Mesquite's business center. The bank and the saloon showed up plainly from this point. And nearer, in an almost obscure corner of the town, Little could see the slim, high steeple of a church. He let his eyes rest on it for a moment or two and wondered, with

a slow smile, how any of the men he had yet seen in Mesquite could have need of such an institution as a church.

He turned and gave his attention again to the immediate hill before him. And at that moment a distant tolling of a bell broke the dreamy stillness of the late morning. It tolled with a clear and hollow tone, down the hillside to meet him. The clapping and clapping and beating of it leaped on down into the valley bottom and went echoing and reechoing across the width and length of Mesquite Valley. It searched out every nook and corner and set them throbbing with the volume of its treble. Then it mounted again to the hilltop and died there. But for a long moment after the bell had ceased ringing, a faint echo of it still hung about the air of the valley.

Little went on up the hill, wondering vaguely about the source of it. And he was not left long in the dark. On top of the hill the street turned abruptly to the left and showed him a schoolhouse, with the children, even then, swarming from it. Forty or more of them, both boys and girls, were already in the yard. They had been dismissed for the noon hour and a great noise of laughter and shouts and a shrill and playful squealing of small girls reached Little as he turned into the street that went past the schoolhouse.

He watched that band of laughing, playing youngsters with a slow smile of interest as he neared them. But at that particular moment, as he rode past watching them, he had not the slightest knowledge of the fact that one of them was destined to take a hand in his fate and change it. He had not the least thought or suspicion that a certain boy of that schoolhouse full of youngsters was to lead him along a trail filled with trouble and danger. But that is exactly what happened.

He was riding on past the schoolhouse, giving a last look to the carefree games of the children, when a group of larger boys up close to the wall of the building caught his eye. And that single glance he cast toward them was enough to make him suddenly pull the stallion to a halt. He swung King about toward the schoolhouse, and with the stallion standing there patiently still, he let his eyes rest upon the group of boys.

There was a dozen or more of them, big and brawny-muscled fellows for their age, packed shoulder to shoulder in a semicircle that faced the wall of the school. And facing that half circle, with his back braced to the wall, was another boy. Toward that youngster Little looked, and it was not hard to see that the rest had him cornered, and forced to it, he had taken up his stand there, like a wild animal at bay.

Yet he was like an animal only in the respect that he was facing his nearest danger. For even the smallest and the weakest of animals will fight, if they are cornered and forced to. Then, if at no other time, they find a bravery that comes near to the point of desperation. But this boy showed no such signs of bravery.

True, his weight lacked twenty pounds and he was half a head shorter than any one of them there. But even a chicken will fight a hawk, if her young are in danger.

Bert Little sat there upon the stallion, watching closely what was happening. And he frowned slowly as he saw the lack of spirit in the boy. He frowned, for from the first he saw something about the dark eyes and the uplifted chin and the slender, strong body of the boy that he liked.

"I been watchin' you for a week," said one of the crowd, stepping out from his fellows and standing before the boy. "I been watchin' you for a week an' you've done a lotta things in that time that I don't like. I've a good notion to give you the beatin' you know you got comin'."

THE boy flinched a little. His small fists were uselessly clenched and pressing hard against his sides. His

face showed white beneath its coat of tan. He was frightened. Little could see it; and his crowd of tormentors could see it. They pressed closer around him with a heartless and gleeful cruelty. But when he spoke, his voice came without a tremble. He even managed to smile a little, though there was not much surety in it.

"I ain't done nothin'," said he. "You can't name nothin' I've done that would call all of you to treat me like this. You know that I ain't."

"Yeah?" sneered the bigger boy. "How about Mary? You been hangin' around her since the day you first come here. An' Mary's my girl. You ask anybody here an' you won't hear 'em say she ain't."

"You wouldn't hear Mary say it," said the boy, frightening himself with his daring, yet loyal to the one friend he had found in Mesquite.

"Shut up!" snarled the other. "I ain't askin' any lip from you. I'm tellin' you what I think an' what I'm gunna do to you."

He doubled his huge fist and drew it back as if to strike. But when the boy flattened himself to the wall and raised a hand to ward off the blow, he dropped his fist with a sneer and stepped back.

"You ain't got the guts of a baby!" he snarled. "You ain't even got the nerve to stand up an' take what you got comin'. But I got you where I want you now an' you ain't gunna get away. I'm gunna tell you what I got again' you an' then let you have it. Mebbe I'll even run you outta town.

"You're foolin' around with Mary, that's the first reason. An' that's enough of a reason. But what about yesterday when you killed my horse?"

"It wasn't no fault of mine," said the boy, desperately. "From the first, you an' the rest have picked on me, tryin' to get me in the worst of it. An' yesterday you got me on that bucker of yours, thinkin' it would be me that got the worst of it. It wasn't no fault of mine that he fell an' broke his neck."

"What's the use of you talkin'?" sneered the other. "I know how it happened. You turned him onto that there ground that the gophers had ate up underneath. You figgered that he'd get his leg in one of them holes an' break his neck. That's what happened. The best horse I ever did have. You had it all planned out. But you'll pay for it. An' nothin' you say is gunna make any difference neither. You're gunna pay big for killin' that horse."

The white lips of the smaller boy were pressed into a tight, straight line. But, frightened though he was, he was not giving an inch.

"D'you think that a bit in the mouth of a wild bucker is enough to hold him? D'you think that reins are enough to turn him?" he cried. "How was I to put him onto that patch of gopher-eaten ground? I'd like to see anyone handle a pitchin' horse an' put it where he wants it."

This violent outburst seemed for a moment to dampen the spirit of the bully. He fell silent, for he saw the truth of those words. But he stood there, with his fists balled and ready as before, searching for some other excuse that would be enough to start the fight. Then another boy stepped from the half circle.

"Judd. Come here," he said, with an evil smile at the pleasure he was getting from it.

Judd Tolover stepped back and lent his ear to the low-whispered words. And as he listened, a cruel light kindled in his eyes. He grinned roughly and strode with a swagger back to his victim. There he stopped, and planting his hands upon his hips, curled his lips in a sneer.

"Jack, here, he's got the idea of what you need. An' we're gunna do it to you. We're gunna get a good strong rail. We're gunna put you on it an' ride you around the yard. We'll let Mary see you. We'll let her get a good look at what a coward you are. We'll

let her hear you cryin' for mercy. An' then d'you think she'll have anything more to do with you? Well, I reckon not. We'll show up your color plenty. Jack, you go and get a pole. Make it fast!"

The face of the smaller boy had gradually been growing paler, until now it appeared white and pinched. This punishment that Judd promised him was the worst and the most humiliating of any that could be forced upon him. For it was a shame that could never be lived down. It would follow him wherever he went and through all of his years to come. And yet he was cornered here without a chance of avoiding it. With a pale, set face and with wild eyes of desperation, he sidled along the wall toward the thinnest part of the crowd. But even that slim chance was wiped from him before he had more than tried it.

"Here, you!" snarled Judd Tolover. "Don't think you'll get away that easy."

And with a leap, he was at the side of the boy. With one hand he caught the shirt front of the youngster and at the same moment he hurled the other, palm open, across his face. The force of it staggered the boy backward, flattening his shoulders to the wall. But even there, Tolover did not quit. A savagery seemed to seize him, for he brought his knee up with a vicious force into the pit of his victim's stomach. It doubled the boy with pain. It dropped him to the ground, gasping in agony. But there was not a single sign of pity from any of the boys in that group of tormentors. They even leaned forward to a better and more open position and, with fiendish relish, grinned as they watched him moaning and gasping with the pain. For mere boys, they were the hardest-hearted lot that Little had ever seen.

BUT at that moment the school teacher strode up to the group, forcing his way through to the inside of the circle. He was a great, huge shouldered giant of a man, with a cruel, coarse-featured face. In one hand he carried a blacksnake, letting its wicked length of leather trail behind him in the dust as he brushed through the crowd of boys and came to the side of young Tolover.

"What's this?" he growled, harshly. "What's the trouble here?"

His small eyes jerked from face to face around the half circle. Then they fell upon the poor, unfortunate youngster and the moment that he saw who it was, his face darkened with hate. He went forward a long stride into the open and catching the boy by the collar, jerked him to his feet.

"So it's you!" he snarled, baring his teeth like an animal. "It's you again. How many times have I got to warn you about gettin' into trouble and stirrin' up a ruckus in the school? Well, I'm done with that. This time you're goin' to get the whip."

Absolute brutality was in his voice and his face as he looked down upon the helpless boy. The vicious fire of hate in his eyes burned deeper. The human side of him was gone.

"I'm goin' to give you a taste of this lash," he snarled. "I'll give you something that you won't be forgettin' in a long time."

There was a murmur of approval from the boys. A harsh laugh, in which there was no single whit of sympathy, ran through them. They opened up a space for the sweep of his whip, waiting gleefully for its downward swish. And into that opening stepped King, the great stallion, as silent and soft-footed as any cat.

"I dunno as I would do that thing, my friend," said Bert Little, his quiet and gentle voice jerking every eye toward him with startling suddenness.

The huge man dropped his hold on the collar of the boy. Like one propelled by an invisible hand he swung about to face Little. And then his lips curled slowly.

"Who are you," he sneered, "to tell

me what I shouldn't do? What've you got to say about it?"

The slow smile that went briefly across the face of Little was enough to chill the blood in the veins.

"I'm only sayin'," he repeated, "that I wouldn't do it."

The face of the big man went black with rage. "Maybe you could get down off your horse," he snarled through his clenched teeth. "Maybe you could show me a good reason, and show me something to back your words, if you was down on your feet where I could reach you."

And Bert Little smiled again.

"Aye," said he. "Mebbe I could do that thing."

He shifted his weight to one stirrup, and with an easy and supple movement he landed lightly upon the ground. It was a startling thing, indeed, to the big man to watch him do it. He had sought to intimidate this stranger with his great size and his rough speech. But to see his challenge so quietly accepted, was a thing he had never expected. It drove him into a rage. And it sent him leaping toward Little with the deadly blacksnake raised for a blow.

But all that Little did was stand there and wait until the whip had almost reached him. Then he moved. He moved with the silent speed of leaping light. One hand flashed out and caught the whip, wrenching it from the hand of the huge man at the same instant that his iron right fist crashed full against the schoolmaster's chin. That blow had all the crushing force of a landslide behind it. It felled the school teacher like a steer that has been struck down by a stroke of lightning. He was hurled, sprawling, to the ground. And he lay there without moving.

The youngster who had thus been saved from further punishment, looked with awe at his benefactor. And his awe increased tenfold when he saw that quiet smile still upon the face of Bert Little.

CHAPTER III

The Work of Coswell

FOR a moment or two Bert Little looked down at the sprawled and silent form of the giant. A low murmur of wonderment ran through the crowd of boys, for the schoolmaster had long been an idol to them. He had been a force that was to be looked up to. He had seemed to them what the greatest and most impassable mountain would seem to the tired climber. They knew and feared and even respected him for the mighty strength that he was famed for. They had come to think that no man in the world was great enough to conquer him. And now to see him crushed to the ground by a single blow of this stranger's iron fist was a thing that their minds could hardly conceive. They stared in awestruck wonder at Bert Little, drawing back until an open lane was made for him to the boy who still stood there, staring about in bewilderment at the sudden change that had taken place. And it seemed harder for him than all the others to realize that a single stroke of this man's hand had freed him from his tormentors and turned the tables upon them.

"Gee, mister!" he half whispered. "D'you know what you've done? You've hit Brock. An' you'd better be puttin' a lotta trail behind you before he come around. He'll make a lotta trouble for you. Mebbe he'll even kill you!"

With a slow and kindly smile, Bert Little walked up beside him. He laid a sun-browned hand upon the head of the youngster.

"We won't be worryin' about that," he said, quietly. "But have you got a bit of time to spare? I'd like to talk with you."

"You wanta talk with me?" gasped the boy, incredulously. He seemed, even, a little afraid to believe what he heard. For gods do not talk with

common mortals, he knew, and it took his breath to hear himself thus addressed by the man who had felled the great Brock so easily. It fairly left him gasping with surprise.

"Aye, I'd like to talk with you, if you got the time," Little repeated.

"Sure I got the time," cried the boy, eagerly. "I got the whole day, if *you* want it!"

Little smiled, and turning with him, caught up the reins of the stallion and strode slowly back to the street. There they sat down upon a pair of flat-topped rocks that had been imbedded into the dirt of the side street by the rains of many seasons. But Little was silent for a moment. He pulled the makings from his jacket pocket and built himself a cigarette. The great dog came and sat before them. He cocked his head to one side and inspected them critically. And at the sight of him, the boy sighed deeply.

"You got a dog there, mister!" he said. "You got a dog that a man only reads about in books. I never seen one like him."

"Aye," smiled Little. "Buck is all of that. He's a great fighter—an' a greater friend."

"Gee!" The eyes of the boy were resting upon the stallion as if he had seen King for the first time. "You gotta horse there. An' he's all horse, every bit of him. I bet he could run circles around anything in the country."

"Aye, he could come pretty near doin' that," said Little, smiling. "There's been none yet beat King. He's ahead of them all."

"King, did you say?" said the boy, in a half whisper. "King! An' there's the dog you call Buck! Say, mister, are you—by jimminy I bet you *are!*"

"What's this?" said Little, with a faint and wondering frown.

The boy was leaning back and staring at him with wide eyes and with a respect that was near to worship.

"My dad, he likes to tell me stories," he said, in a husky voice. "He likes most of all to tell me about a man who rides here an' there over the country, doin' good where it's needed, an' givin' the bullies an' the killers what they got comin'. To the folks that're in trouble there ain't nobody like this man. He's a regular god to them. My dad tells me that he's gotta horse an' a dog. An' he calls them King an' Buck!"

He ended with a rising voice, as if he defied Little to deny his identity. But then he fell silent and dropping his head, dug at the ground with the heel of his shoe. And Little watched him with a faint smile.

"Is there anything wrong?" he said, gently.

"Yes," said the boy. "My dad says that he ain't got no friends except his horse an' his dog. Here's what's wrong. I'd like to be your friend, Bert Little! The kind of a friend you'd keep!"

Little looked upon his bowed head and laid his hand gently upon it.

"I reckon such a thing could happen—"

"Billy—Billy Lansing," said the boy, eagerly.

"Aye, I reckon such a thing could happen, Billy," smiled Little. "We'll start right now to be friends."

"Jimminy!" sighed the boy. "I never thought nothin' like this would ever happen to me. It's like a dream comin' true. An' I'm really goin' to be your friend, Bert?"

"Well, I ride around a bit an' see things. I try the mountains sometimes, an' again it'll be the valleys. But I manage to keep on the trail."

"You're a manhunter, then, like they say?" gasped the boy, hoping that he was right, yet half afraid that he might be. "You're on somebody's trail right now, I betcha."

"Not now, Billy," smiled Little. "I never hunt up a job like that. It comes to a man often enough, if he's standin' by with his eyes open."

"That's the life, I bet," said the boy. "When I'm a bit older, I'm goin' to try it. I'm goin' to hunt down all

the men that've made trouble for my dad. I'm goin' to hunt them out an' give them what they've had comin' for a long time."

He said this in a quiet and assuring tone, and without a thought of bragging. It was merely a positive knowledge that some day he would deal with his enemies as they deserved. And looking upon the face of this boy, Little found there a certain strength that would mature some day into what Billy dreamed of.

"Aye, Billy, that's right. But now I want to ask you a question or two. The way it looks to me, you're pretty well acquainted with the ways of the town. You've been here long enough to get the lay of things. Can you tell me a bit about it?"

"I sure can!" said Billy. "I can tell you enough to make your head spin. For instance when Lafler Coswell drops into town, you oughta see the way these crooks an' murderers eat outta his hand. He breathes a word, an' that minute it's the law. An' there ain't a man nowhere to question it. They don't dare, if they wanta live any longer. D'you see how it is? He owns the whole country, an' he rules it like a king would, I tell you."

"AYE, but what does the law say about this Coswell?" asked Bert Little, casually.

"The law? There ain't such a thing in this whole country. An' they're mighty certain that they ain't goin' to have any. They figger every stranger that comes here is a Ranger. They kill them all. I dunno how my dad has got along safe this week without meetin' with trouble. They've warned him to go, but he stays on. Coswell will get him yet."

He said this with the quiet assurance of an old, experienced man. And Little was astounded by his very calmness. He spoke of the coming disaster of his father in a resigned sort of way, and without a spark of hope.

"These boys here, an' the schoolmaster," said Little, "they don't seem very friendly with you."

"That's the same thing," sighed Billy. "I'm a stranger in Mesquite. I'm on the outside an' they aim to keep me there. Don't you see, Bert?

"What you saw today, it's the same as always. They've been fixin' to get me, one way or the other, since I first came here. They've tried every way they could to run me out. But now that there's really something happened to give them the excuse, they'll get down to business. They'll do the thing up proper, now."

"An' I reckon I'm the cause of it," said Little. "I've made things worse for you."

"By hittin' Brock? By givin' that bully what he had comin'? Lemme say this. I wouldn't have it no other way. You dunno what a pretty sight it was, seein' him crash down like a tree. What if they do make more trouble for me? The thing was more'n worth it. Look! Look there, Bert! Brock's comin' around. Now we'll see what he's got in mind. Mebbe he'll be over here."

Little turned and looked where the boy was excitedly pointing. And a slow, grim smile played about a corner of his mouth as he waited to see what the man would do. But Brock had no desire for further trouble with this iron-fisted stranger. Never in his life had he been handled so easily. Never had he seen such supple speed of movement, not felt such a mighty and iron strength, as he had found in this stranger. And he was asking no further test of it. He came slowly to his feet, shaking his head and blinking his piggish eyes, like an ox that had been badly shaken up in a fall. But without a glance in the direction of Bert Little and young Billy, he turned and stumbled through the open door of the schoolhouse. And following this damning admittance of crushing defeat, there was a heavy and eloquent silence. Billy turned back to Little and he looked at his new friend with shining eyes. In that moment his

respect for Little had leaped up as if he were standing and contemplating upon the grim and lofty shoulders of some mighty, rugged mountain. For in that moment of triumph, his new found friend seemed to him as great and as strong as would that mountain.

"Well," said Bert Little, turning back to young Billy Lansing, his smile gone, "I reckon the schoolin' that you'd get in this place an' under that teacher wouldn't help you much. You can come along with me, if you want. I'll take you home. I'll see your dad an' tell him the way the thing is. I reckon he wouldn't have you in this school, if he knew the way you're treated. How does that suit you, Billy?"

"How would it suit me?" cried Billy, in a great rush of excitement. "You'd do that for me? An' you'd let me ride on the back of that racer with you? Gee! There's nothin' that would suit me better, Bert. Nothin' except mebbe gettin' the chance to ride with you on one of your trails."

"We might even fix that up," said Little, smiling. "We'll see your dad about it an' see what he has to say."

The heart of young Billy Lansing sang with pure joy at the words of Little. For the thrill and the anticipation of riding along on a trail with the great Bert Little was more than had ever entered into the dreams of young Billy.

"Would you do that, Bert?" he gasped. "Would you take me along with you?"

"Aye, I'd be glad of the chance to do it," smiled Little. "An' I reckon there's no better time than now to get started. Here. You gimme a hand an' I'll help you up here on the back of King."

IT WAS an hour's walk from the schoolhouse to the home of Billy Lansing, but the easy and smooth flowing stride of the great stallion cut the time it took to cover the distance down to an even ten minutes. He floated along over the uneven ups and downs of the trail as lightly as over a feather. And young Billy was astounded at the effortless way that he did it. They went straight south from Mesquite into a region of little, rolling hills. On every side was tall, lush grass, with the freshness and the greenness of it enough to gladden the heart of any rancher. After a while a fence appeared on one side of them and in that great enclosure there were scattered bunches of grazing cattle. These Billy Lansing proudly pointed out as his father's. A small fortune in lands and in stock passed beside them. And then they came in sight of the ranchhouse. The road turned suddenly to the right and ran up before a group of buildings. But over everything there seemed to be a great hush, as if the place was deserted. And even as they rode into the yard, young Billy caught the arms of Little in a nervous, anxious grip.

"Look, Bert!" he cried. "Look around you. There's something wrong. Something's happened here."

And it was perfectly obvious that trouble had been abroad. The door of the house was open. It sagged heavily upon its lower hinge. Its panels were split and broken, as if a timber had been used to crush it in. And that in itself was enough to prove the greatest of Billy's fears. But that was not all, by far. All over the front of the house the windows were broken and on some of the casings marks betrayed where bullets had splintered the wood. And there in one corner of the yard lay the body of a horse. It was sprawled awkwardly, as if it had been shot in mid-stride and had died running.

All this the quick eye of Little had seen from the roadside, even as they turned in toward the house. And he had searched every foot of the premises by the time they had reached the yard. He rode up to the porch before he swung from the saddle. Then he looked up, for a dry groan was wrenched from the lips of the boy.

The face of Billy was deadly white with fear, as he looked around at the wreckage of his home. His eyes were wild and desperate. But no murmur of his fears had passed his tightly pressed lips.

"Take it easy, son," said Little, gently, as he lifted the boy to the ground. "There's been trouble here. Aye. But you stand here an' wait, while I look around a bit. Mebbe everything is all right after all. So don't you worry yet."

"But mebbe everything ain't alright," said Billy hoarsely. "Mebbe Coswell has been here, Bert! Where's dad? An' where's Beth?"

"Who's Beth?" asked Little, with sudden and grave interest. An awful possibility began to grow into a conviction.

"Beth? Why, that's my sister." There was a catch in the low, strained voice of the boy. He broke off suddenly and looked full into the grim face of Little. "D'you think it's happened, Bert?" he whispered, then.

"Well, I dunno," said Little. "You wait here a bit, Billy. I'll go look around."

He stepped up onto the porch and strode silently across to the battered door. He paused there for a moment and looked back at the waiting boy, noting the paleness of his set, grim face and the rigid line of his jaw. Little knew what he would find in that house, but he could think of no way to make the blow easier for the boy. Then, with a slow shake of his head and his face grim-lined, he turned and stepped on through the doorway.

The room into which he came was a shambles. Chairs were overturned. A table was canted sideways against the wall. Everywhere lay broken furniture. Then Little saw what he sought. In a far corner of the room lay the body of a man. His head had sunken upon a doubled arm, as if an effort to raise himself had been too great and he had fallen back to the floor. And at the very moment that Little saw him, the man moved. Slowly, and with a mighty effort, he raised his pain-lined face toward the doorway and Little. His eyes were wild and staring, as if his sight was failing.

But as he raised his head, the arm on which it had been resting unfolded. It came out before him along the floor and in his hand he gripped a long-barreled revolver. With a desperate gleam in his eyes, he tipped it up until the muzzle held full upon the chest of Little. Then he pressed the trigger.

Many times before this day Bert Little had faced death; and some of those times he had barely come from it safely. But never had he met a time like this. Here was a dying man who was not on the opposite side of him; whom he was even ready to befriend. But now this man was seeking his life and he was powerless to use the weapons in his holsters as a defense.

HE WATCHED the muzzle of the gun grow steady. He saw the muscles of Lansing's hand tighten. And then he leaped like a tiger to the side.

The hammer of the gun fell. But there was no answering explosion. There was no sound at all save a dull click as the firing pin dropped on a chamber of the empty gun. With a groan of resignation, Lansing dropped the useless weapon. But he kept his clouding eyes glued to the face of Bert Little.

"So he sent you back—to finish me off—" he gasped, with a hoarse, dry rattle in his throat. "He wasn't satisfied—with his job—is that it? Well —why d'you wait?"

Little was at his side in an instant. He lifted the man to a sitting position and supported him against his knee.

"Easy now. Take it easy," he said, gently. "I'm a friend, Lansing, I'm here to help you, if I can."

"You ain't with Coswell?" groaned the man. "Then—who are you?"

"Names don't matter. But if you want mine, it's Bert Little."

"Little—that famous fighter? He's down—in Mexico . . . . You—ain't tellin' me the—truth—stranger . . . . You—ain't Little."

"Aye, I was down in Mexico, that's right. But now I'm up here again. I've got Billy outside here. D'you want to see him?"

"You've got Billy? . . . . Send Billy—in—"

But that was not necessary. The boy had followed to the doorway and when Little turned, he saw Billy standing there like a statue, his youthful face a white stone mask. And now he slipped across the room to the side of his dying father. He dropped down beside him, dry-eyed, but a low groan of anguish escaped from his tightly pressed lips. His hands found those of his father and he clutched them to him.

"Dad! Dad!" he said hoarsely. "Tell me! It was Coswell that done for you? It was that murderer who did it?"

"It was Coswell! But you forget it—Billy. . . . An' tell me—if this man—is Bert Little!"

"He's Bert an' he's a friend of mine," cried the boy. "But dad—"

"Forget me—I'm old . . . . Most done for—anyway . . . . But Billy—they got Sis . . . . they got Beth . . . . Get her back—Billy! For Gawd's sake—get her back. Mebbe Little—here—will help you . . . . I fought hard—but they was too many."

"I'll get her back, dad! I'll get Beth, all right. But you, are you goin' to be all right?"

"I'm fine—son! It—makes me—glad—to hear you—talk like that . . . Now you—Little—will you help?"

"I'll never stop," said Bert Little, with a quiet strength in his voice, "until your girl is back here safe."

"Thanks—Little—you're a man—I've heard them tell about . . . . You're provin' it—now—"

His dimming eyes sought those of his son. His roughened hands closed upon those of the boy.

"Billy—Billy—you're a good boy . . . . Grow to be a man—like—Bert Little."

So with the hands of his boy in his feeble grasp, he gave up his hold on life. Bert Little laid him gently back on the floor and rising, led the stunned boy outside to the yard. But there a change seemed to come over Billy. He raised a face to Little on which years had suddenly been added. And there was a great seriousness in his voice.

"I reckon there's no need to wait, Bert," he said. "There's a fast horse in the barn. It was my dad's horse. I'll saddle it an' we'll take the trail. Coswell is goin' to pay!"

"Aye," said Bert Little. "You wanted to take the trail with me. You've lost a lot this day an' it's no more'n right that I take you. I'll do what I can, Billy. I'll show you what I can. An' together we'll find Coswell an' pay him! Now you set down an' rest a bit. I'll look to your dad. After that's done, I'll leave you alone until you're ready. Is that all right, Billy?"

"That's all right, Bert. I'd like to put him away by myself. You can wait for me down the road a-ways. An' I'm thankin' you for all that you're doin'."

He sat down with a low groan and ran his hands through his tousled hair.

CHAPTER IV

THE PLEDGE

BERT LITTLE and Billy Lansing laid away the lad's father. He put a crudely made little cross at the head of the mound and at the foot a stake. Then they returned to the house. A few minutes later Billy came out, and now he was dressed for the trail. Around his slender waist, swinging low upon his thigh, was belted the old and well-worn Colt revolver that had been his father's.

"Well, Bert, we're ready to be on our way, I guess." And Little could see that already the boy had mastered his grief, as gallantly as could be expected of any man, and had put it from his mind. "My horse is warmed an' anxious to be away. You take the lead an' I'll manage to follow along."

"Aye," said Little, with a faint smile. "I can see that your horse is warmed an' anxious to go. But lemme tell you something, Billy, an' it'd be a good thing to remember. You start a race slow an' warm up your mount by easy stages an' you'll be a lot surer to be in for a good strong finish. An' sometimes that turns out to be a mighty important thing. A strong horse has saved a good many men, Billy."

The boy dropped his head. He was silent for a moment. And then he met the eye of Little with a sober calm, but with no whit of rebellion.

"You're right, Bert," said he. "An' I'm wrong. I've made a fool of myself at the very start. I dunno how you got the patience to have me along with you, blunderin' everything I try."

Bert Little smiled and gaining his feet, clapped the boy on the shoulder.

"It's all right, Billy," said he. "Older an' wiser heads than either you or me have made worse mistakes than that. Only it's a good thing to keep in mind. A fresh horse is a mighty important thing to a man in this country."

"I'll remember, Bert," said the boy. "You won't find me makin' the mistake again. But if you see me doin' something wrong, you come right out an' tell me, will you?"

"Aye," smiled Little. "An' now I reckon we'd better be gettin' on."

"Can we find them, d'you think, Bert," said Billy, almost hopelessly. "This is a big country to run a trail down in."

"There was never a trail made that Buck couldn't follow," smiled Little. "We'll find them all right. It's after that that our work will start. Aye, an' it's liable to be some mighty hard work that we'll have. Come on, Buck. Lead out, boy."

Little swung lightly upon the back of the stallion and side by side the two took up the trail. And as they went along, the heart of young Billy Lansing swelled with the thought of what was happening to him. Here he was, riding along at the side of the famous Bert Little; a companion and a friend of that great and mighty fighter; riding a trail of danger and trouble with him and ready to take his share of all the hardships they met with. It was enough to fairly make the head spin with excitement. It was something to dream of and remember through all the rest of his years.

He watched Little out of the tail of his eye. He saw how smoothly the man handled himself in the saddle; and how strong and steady were his lean, sunbrowned hands. So much had happened and it all seemed so strange and unreal, that Billy actually began wondering if it were not all a dream. But there was Bert Little riding beside him, his strong, bronzed face as calm as the gentle breeze that met them from the south. And the boy knew that the death of his father and loss of his sister was all a true and grim reality. This day had changed his life completely. But it had found for him, also, a mighty friend; a man of whom he had heard strange stories. And close at hand now, he seemed, indeed, a very giant and capable of everything that he had ever heard them tell about Bert Little.

So they went on down the trail, with Buck out before them, picking out their path of travel with never-failing ease. For an hour or more they went slowly. Billy's horse lifted up its head, anxious to be away on the trail. Then they quickened their pace. The trail they followed took them by winding ways through rough and hilly country. Now great forests loomed around them. And the lowering sun plunged their depths into even darker and gloomier shadows. And again they

would ride out into the sunshine, in a region of barren and worthless hills. But always they worked straight southward toward the brakes of the border. And there night overtook them.

But darkness did not stop them. They kept close behind the great dog; and Buck never hesitated. He led them over a trail that gradually grew rougher and wilder. He took them into dry and twisting washes where no trail showed at all. They wound their way through desolate country and brushed through thickly growing foliage and branches. And at the end of an hour of this blind riding, they came suddenly to the end of the trail. For Buck had stopped and the horses had come up beside him.

CHAPTER V

THE CACHE

HAD the great dog been there a dozen times, he could not have followed a straighter course to the cache. He had taken them to the rim of the canyon below. They saw a cluster of cabins, with shafts of light coming from their windows, but no sound of life reached them from below. For a brief moment Bert Little looked at the scene below him and then, slipping from the back of the stallion, he stepped over to the side of the boy.

"You wait here a bit, Billy," he said. "I'm gonna have a look around an' find the best way down to the canyon."

"You won't be gone long, Bert, will you? An' promise me you won't go down in there without takin' me along." The heart of Billy Lansing was pounding heavily against his side with excitement, now that the danger was before him. But not a tremor showed in his voice.

"Aye, Billy, I'll come back for you," smiled Little. "I'll be gone only a short time. You stay an' watch the horses. There's no tellin' when we'll need them an' we want them ready at hand. Buck, you stay here an' watch."

One moment Bert Little had been standing there beside him. And the next, he was gone. He simply vanished into the thin air of the night. With a chill running over him, the boy sat there, holding with one hand the reins of King and gripping with the other, the black, well-worn butt of his gun. He knew that Little was seeking the pass into the canyon and he was certain that the attempt would be a success.

And it was well that Little had this bit of foresight. He expected to find the entrance guarded, but he had no thought of finding what he did! The moon came out with sudden brightness, exposing all the higher ground to full view. But with the silent grace and speed of a stalking tiger, Bert Little moved toward the entrance.

Always keeping to the hollows. He was no more than a shadow moving forward. And in this manner he came within a few feet of the entrance and there he crouched down behind a huge boulder to listen.

On the moment he heard a distant pound of hoofs! Was it his stallion following him? Had he broken away from the boy and followed? He drew closer to the boulder and slipped a Colt into the palm of his hand. The oncoming horse drew nearer and then Little smiled. It was not his mount. The sweeping stride of the stallion could never be mistaken!

He heard a sudden, tense whispering directly ahead of him in the entrance. He could not distinguish what was said, but he heard a number of voices. The rider was only a little way from the entrance now. Little saw him for a moment as he crossed an open moonlight stretch. Then the rider slowed his pace. He passed Little's hiding place and entered the pass. Immediately he was surrounded by men and guns that seemed to leap up from nowhere! He jerked his horse to a stop

with a curse and looked down at the men around him.

"What the hell is this?" he cried. "Are you aimin' to drill me just for comin' in late? Anyway, would it take the whole crowd of you to do it? What's the idea?"

"Carson! Hell! Is it you?" said a man. "We thought you was Little."

"Little!" cried Carson. "You know it already, then? I most killed my horse bringin' that word in to the chief. How'd you hear? How'd you learn it so soon?"

"Williams came in more'n an hour ago. He brought us the news that we could expect that gun-fighter any minute. He said Little had gone through Mesquite an' was headed this way. The chief has got the bunch of us here to take him when he comes in. Get down an' stretch, Carson. Mebbe there'll be some action here yet."

"That's the straight of it," said Carson, as he dismounted. "But what is it the chief had done that would send Little on his trail?"

A man laughed roughly. "The chief's gone an' done a-plenty," he said. "He brought a woman into camp tonight. Ain't that enough to set Little on his trail?"

"The chief's got a woman in camp?" cried Carson.

"That he has. It's old man Lansing's girl. Coswell an' some of us went in an' finished Lansing off today. But the girl, she didn't like seein' her dad die. She gets herself a rifle an' opens up on us. Well, the chief likes spunk. So he brought her in. When Little comes, we're to stop him, take his guns an' lead him on in. I dunno his game, but the chief's got something on his mind. I wouldn't like to be Little."

Bert Little waited to hear no more. He turned from the boulder and stole silently away through the shadows in the direction he had come. And a few minutes later he was again at the side of the boy.

"I found the pass all right, Billy," said he. "But we're gunna have to find another way into the canyon. They've got the entrance too well guarded. We wouldn't stand a chance of gettin' through. Here. Mebbe we can go over the bluff. Mebbe we can make use of these trees. A rope an' the limbs will make it a simple enough matter. You hand me the rope when I'm ready."

Directly above his head, about ten feet in the air, was a larger limb that reached well in over the edge of the bluff. He led his horse beneath it and standing upon the back of the stallion, he found it a simple matter to swing upon the limb. Then Billy handed up the rope to him and he tied an end securely to the limb, letting the length drop down to the floor of the canyon, close against the bluff. Then he turned to the boy.

"Alright, Billy," said he. "Climb down from the saddle an' try it. We'll leave the horses here. Buck! Watch them."

The big dog settled upon his haunches, watching with his head cocked to the side as the boy slid from the saddle and lowered himself down the rope. And when Little followed, going from sight over the rim, he whined softly. But he did not move from his station beside the horses. His master had left him on guard and only death would remove him.

WITH the rope to aid them, it was an easy matter for Little and the boy to reach the floor of the canyon. And there they found a dense thicket of brush and tree trunks around them through which even the brightness of the sun could not penetrate. A pitch blackness hung like a mantle around them. But Little did not hesitate. He took the hand of the boy in his and went swiftly forward, winding around the trunks of trees, striding silently over the deep carpet of moss and needles, but never pausing. Billy could see no trail through the thicket. There was nothing but a great blackness and dense-growing foliage on every side. Yet Bert Little was leading him easily through it, turning this way and that, never

cracking a twig underfoot nor breaking a limb as they brushed by. And he saw that Little was finding a way where there seemed to be no opening at all. He saw this and kept close to Little's side, wondering what new magic his great friend would show him before the night was over. Then they came to the open of the canyon and Little turned to him.

"Billy," said he, "there's danger ahead of us there. There's liable to be shootin' an' mebbe death. I'm thinkin' you oughta stay here an' wait for me."

"You lead on, Bert," said the boy, his heart thumping at the very daring of the words, but without a bit of fear, "an' I'll manage to follow. I gotta gun here. I'm all right."

So they went ahead again, side by side, silently. And the boy glanced now and again up at Little, sighing to think of the great strength and courage that was always about him.

It was not hard to pick out the main cabin. It stood apart from the rest and was somewhat larger. Toward that cabin the two stole. There was no sound at all in the canyon. And Little smiled slightly as he thought of the men waiting for him at the entrance.

They would never guess that he was already past them! They would never know how simple it had been. They slipped silently up to the main cabin and looked in at the lighted window.

There, pacing the floor with his long, sweeping strides, was none other than the outlaw, Coswell. There could be no mistaking his identity. Little was sure of that. His long arms were swinging loosely at his sides and his great head was lowered as he circled the room incessantly. Now and again he would pause and a slow smile would break upon his long, narrow face. And whenever this happened, the girl who crouched in a chair at the far end of the room, trembled. Suddenly, the malicious and terrible voice of Coswell broke the silence.

"I'll have him!" he said. "I'll have him this very night. And then we'll see if he can put his hand in my business whenever he wants." Suddenly, the outlaw chieftan turned to the girl and smiled his slow, evil smile. "You'll like me," he said. "You like me more than you can guess as soon as you learn to know me. That's all you need to do. Just learn to know me."

She raised her eyes to meet his, slowly, as if hypnotized. Then she shivered.

"You're going to be sorry for the work of this night," said she. "If Bert Little has really started on your trail, he'll come through with flying colors. There is no obstacle great enough to stop him."

He smiled almost pleasantly upon her.

"Ah, yes," said he, in his suave, cold voice. "Little will come. I give him credit for the fighting heart that he's got. There was never a braver man than Little. But what's bravery? It's only a fool that has it. It's a bigger fool that uses it. Everywhere he turns it's going to put him into trouble. They've tacked a name on him and now in everything he does, he's got to live up to that name. He's got to do what's expected of him. Bravery? Yes, Little has it. And he'll come. But he doesn't expect the reception that I've planned for him. He doesn't know that I've placed my whole band at the entrance to meet him. One hour—perhaps two or three—than he'll come and he'll be escorted in by my men!" His mirthless laugh filled the room until it seemed to rock and tremble with the sound.

"Little will come," she said, strong in her faith in the man she had never even seen. "He is too great a man to let a gang of outlaws stop him. He'll step through that doorway and he'll have his guns in his holsters."

"Yes, he'll come through that doorway," smiled Coswell. "I've left it unlocked purposely. But his hands will be securely bound and his holsters will be empty. Yes, Little will come through that doorway."

HIS jarring laugh rang out again and he turned slowly to face the door at which the girl was staring so fixedly. Then the laugh died abruptly in his throat and the great body of the outlaw stiffened. For there before him stood Bert Little. He had opened the door and stepped through into the room. And all so silently that Coswell had not heard him.

"Ah, Little!" Coswell murmured. "You passed my men safely?"

"Aye," said the quiet voice of Little. "You can see that without askin'."

"I've been expecting you," the outlaw smiled. "I tell you, Little, I'm glad that you've done it. I'm really glad that you've come through with flying colors, because now we two are on even terms and we can settle this dispute between ourselves. Does that satisfy you, Little? Are you game to give it a try?" Coswell was beaten and this was his final play. And though Little knew it, he only smiled.

"Aye. It's all right with me. Shall it be with guns or hands or with the knives?"

The outlaw actually started. "Ah, Little!" he cried. "Do you give me that choice? Would you let it be with knives? With a gun—I wouldn't have much chance against your great skill. But take a knife—ah, *we'll use the knives.*"

The code of a fighter was speaking in Bert Little. He held the advantage over Coswell. If he wished, he could use it and without the slightest trouble he could escape from the canyon with Billy and his sister. But here was a challenge handed him and the honor of Bert Little forced him to accept it.

Young Billy had stepped through the doorway behind Little. He glanced once at his sister, and then, with a proud nod and a light of worship in his eyes, he looked up into the face of Bert Little. Then that great fighter spoke to him, though he kept his eyes on Coswell.

"Billy, watch your sister. Guard her with your life. Get your gun into your hand an' if anything happens to me here, use it. Take Beth to the rope an' climb up to the horses. Take her safely outta the country. Is all that clear, Billy?"

"It's all clear, Bert," said the boy, excitement running high in his voice. "But don't you worry about us. Coswell ain't goin' to beat you. Why, there ain't no man in the whole world that could do that! Coswell's as good as done for right now."

"I dunno," said Little, with a faint smile. "But you keep your gun handy, anyway." He glanced swiftly at the girl and saw her beautiful, pale face uplifted with new hope, saw her dilated eyes holding anxiously upon him, her lips half parted. The single glance, before his eyes jerked back to the face of the outlaw, showed him the infinite faith that she held in him. It was a picture that he would never forget and one that would strengthen the heart of any man to his greatest effort. So he drew his knife from his belt as he turned back to face the outlaw. And his strange and famous half-smile, with all its terrible grimness, settled upon his lips. "Coswell," said he, lightly, "are you ready, man?"

"Ready? Ah, yes! And I'm happy. I wouldn't have it any other way. The greatest man on the border to fight me and the feel of a knife in my hand. I'm ready for you, Little."

The two circled, sliding quietly over the floor. The long-bladed knives were held before them, ready for a flashing thrust. The long, narrow face of the outlaw was twisted into a smile. He moved around the room in sweeping strides, his huge body half bent, his long, hairy arm outstretched before him with the knife. And Bert Little followed him, as swift and supple as a stalking tiger.

Suddenly the outlaw lunged forward and his knife flashed out in a white blur, but Little moved to the side with a swift, gliding step and Coswell went

past him. The girl huddled in her chair and watched them, her face white and strained. Little's victory meant her life. And young Billy had no doubts about that victory. His face glowed brightly with pride as he watched the supple movements of Little.

Coswell caught his balance, turned and leaped in again. And this time the knife of Little flashed to meet him. It traveled high, then turned and leaped downward toward the outlaw's heart. And at the last moment, when it seemed on the point of plunging into the heaving chest of the giant outlaw leader, the hairy hand of Coswell flashed across and fastened onto the wrist of Little, forcing his arm downward. And in that moment when Little's body was left open, the knife of Coswell flashed toward his chest. But in mid-swing, the arm of the outlaw was halted. Fingers of steel closed upon it and it was held rigid. Thus locked together, the two great fighters swayed across the cabin.

They crashed against a table, but kept their footing. They balanced on its edge and Little was underneath. The needle-sharp point of Coswell's knife was no more than six inches from his chest and leverage was against him. Coswell smiled, for in that great, long arm of his was the strength of two men, and he had the upper hand. He saw victory ahead and forced downward with the knife with all his mammoth strength. But there was in Little the strength of steel, and now he called it forth. Sweat stood in beads on the face of the outlaw, but his knife went no further downward. Instead, it was slowly but surely forced up and away from the broad chest of Little. He groaned as he saw the turning. It came darting on wings as swift as light. The body of Little expanded. No human strength could have held him. He broke the hold of Coswell and his knife flashed upward, burying its blade deep into the chest of the outlaw. Coswell staggered backward. He sighed and settled slowly to the floor.

CHAPTER VI

TROUBLE

BERT LITTLE gave the fallen outlaw leader not a glance. At a single stride he crossed the room to the girl, and taking Beth Lansing by the hand, hurried out of the cabin with young Billy at his side, still clutching his drawn revolver.

"Run, Billy!" said Little, tersely. "Make for the tree with all your speed. Mebbe now we've been too long in here to get out without trouble."

The open of the canyon's floor lay before them, bathed in the full light of the high-riding moon. And there was no other way. They could not circle and keep to the more shadowed hollows. Time was playing against them and Little knew that they had rone to waste. So out across the open, moonlit stretch they started, with young Billy racing along as fleet-footed as a deer and with Little following closely along behind, the hand of Beth Lansing tightly gripping his. And she did not stumble nor fall behind. She kept at that heart-breaking pace with the true courage of a fighter.

But they had covered hardly more than half the distance when a rattle of gunshots straight out before them shattered the silence of the night. And both Little and the boy knew at once that the shooting came from the very point on the bluff where they had left their horses. The boy paused and sent a startled glance at Little. Bert Little waved him on.

"Don't stop, Billy. We can do no good here. Make for the tree with all your speed. Mebbe we're not too late yet."

"That shootin'!" gasped the boy, sucking in his lost breath through hard-clenched teeth. "D'you suppose they got Buck? D'you think they killed him?"

"Not Buck," said Little, though he was by no means as sure as he made

himself sound. "Not the dog, Billy. Buck can care for himself in any company. Aye, but I reckon that's what they're tryin'. Come along, now."

A dead silence followed the shooting, and in that silence they reached the sheltering darkness of the thicket. There they slowed their pace, working their way silently through the brush to the base of the huge tree from whose limb hung the rope. And it still dangled there as they had left it. There was no sign about anything that would create suspicion. And both the boy and the girl sighed with relief as they saw this. Bert Little, with a grim look in his eye and the memory of the shooting still fresh in his mind, took hold upon the rope and turned to them.

"I'm gunna climb up first," he said. "I'll take a look around an' if the way's clear, I'll haul the both of you up. Wait here an' make no move."

He turned to the rope, and gripping it with his iron fingers, lifted his body upward, hand over hand. But he had gone no further than ten feet up the face of the bluff when trouble again struck him. He felt a quick tug on the rope above him. And then he shot downward like a plummet. With the litheness of a cat, he twisted about and landed lightly upon his feet. But even before he plunged the full of those ten feet back to the ground, he knew what had happened. He knew that a man was there on the bluff above him and that he had slashed through the rope with a stroke of a keen-bladed knife. He had waited there, perhaps, for them to come back to the rope and climb it, planning to drop them and send them to their death in the fall; but in his nervousness he had cut the rope too soon to harm Little.

The man was up there in the darkness above him. Little had no doubt of it. But where, then, was Buck? He thought of the shooting and pictured the great dog lying dead from a bullet. And even as he landed at the base of the tree, his guns were ready in his hands.

The boy grasped him by the arm to steady him. And over the shoulder of Billy he saw the girl, her pale face showing dimly in the black pit of darkness.

"Bert! Are you all right?" cried Billy, in a tense whisper. "What happened? D'you fall?"

"Aye, I'm all right," said Little. "The rope broke an' let me down. It was nothin'."

"Bert, you're holdin' something back. That rope wouldn't break. A pair of horses couldn't pull it apart, even. Somebody cut it on you, didn't they?"

"Quiet," Little cautioned. "Aye, Billy, I think mebbe you're right. I reckon somebody cut the rope."

"Who d'you think, Bert? Could some of Coswell's men have found it?"

"Aye, no doubt. But that's a thing I aim to find out. Keep a sharp eye, Billy, an' have your gun handy. There's no tellin' what's gunna happen here."

He holstered one of his guns and with a single, silent stride, stepped across to the trunk of the tree. But even before he had begun to climb it, a great clamoring broke out on the bluff above them. A mighty growl, low and thundering in its deep volume, sounded. It ended in a snarl, high-pitched and deadly. And swiftly following it they heard a smothered curse and a low cry of fear. That cry was still upon the lips of the man when he brought his gun into play. Once, twice it thundered; and then, again. The echo of those shots went ricocheting up and down the length of the canyon, fading finally in a far corner. But drowning out that echo, almost, the snarl of the great dog reached them. And there was a note or a quality in it of something like a savage triumph. Bert Little paused to listen to it. He lifted up his head and stood motionless, as if the snarling of the great dog was a kind of music to

him. And slowly, his strange, grim half-smile came over his face.

"Aye, that's Buck," said he, in a voice that carried so much of the wild that his two silent listeners stiffened. "That's Buck, an' he's still all right!"

HIS voice was drowned suddenly by a scream of pain and fear from above. The savage snarl of the dog rose. There was a sound of a struggle; and then again that scream of fear. Brush crashed, and looking upward, Little saw a dark shadow outlined against the lighter gray of the sky. It seemed to be hanging there in space above them for a brief moment. But that swift glance that Little cast upward showed him that it was falling straight down upon them with the speed of a hurtling rock. A quick sweep of his arms brought Billy and the girl to the tree trunk. And he was none too soon, for at that instant there was a dull thud as the body of the man and the dog struck the ground.

The hands of Little knotted into fists. He tore his eyes from the faces of his companions and forced them to the spot where the two had fallen. He could see nothing in the darkness and there was only a vast silence around him. But he knew what he would see if the light was there to aid him. He knew that no man, nor even the muscle-toughened body of the great Buck, could fall that distance without being crushed to death in the drop. He pictured the scene to himself, striving to pierce the darkness. But his heart was a cold lump of ice in his breast. He knew that his mighty fighting companion, the friend that had saved him in more than one crisis, was lying there in death. He took a slow step forward, balling his hands into iron fists, half-dazed with the realization of what had happened.

But then a cold muzzle touched his hand. The rough tongue of Buck licked at his fingers. And the tail of the great dog beat against his leg. Little knelt and laid a gentle hand upon his head. And all unmindful of the two who watched, he spoke softly into the ear of the dog.

"Buck! Buck!" said he. "I thought mebbe you was a goner. I was afraid that fall had ended you. But here you are as strong an' as sound as ever. Buck, you dunno how glad it makes me, seein' you're all right."

He gained his feet abruptly, then, and strode silently back to the tree.

"I'm gunna climb up," he said. "We'll need the other rope. You wait down here to the last, Billy, until we get the girl an' Buck up. See that the rope is tied around them in a way it can't slip. You mind what happened to him." He nodded over his shoulder to the silent shadow lying at the base of the bluff. "Can you do it, Billy?"

"I'll do it all, Bert," said the boy, grim-lipped. "You don't have to go worryin' about me. I know every knot that you can tie in a rope an' I'll be sure the one I use won't slip."

"An' you, girl. You won't be worryin' down here alone with Billy for a few minutes?" said Little. "I'll have that rope down in no time."

She laid her hand gently upon his arm and looked across at him through the darkness.

"I won't be worrying," said she, in low, rich tones. "I'll be thinking of all that you've done for us; and how could I be worrying then?"

"The time to thank me is after I've got you safely away from here," smiled Little. "I dunno what's ahead of us, mebbe a lotta trouble yet. I'm wonderin' if our horses are still above here. Without them, we'd have a hard time gettin' away from Coswell's men."

He turned and began his climb. And with the thick growth of limbs which the tree had to aid him, he went swiftly up to the top. He worked his way carefully along the limb that reached in over the bluff, and before he had fully come to the end of it and dropped down to the ground, he saw the stallion. It was standing a little way back from the brink of the cliff

and catching the scent of its master, it lifted high its noble head and neighed softly. But Billy's mount was nowhere in sight, and it was from it that Little had to get the other rope. He walked across the open ground, bent low to study the hoof marks in the moonlight. It would not be hard to follow the racer. But time was precious, and if the horse had gone far, perhaps disaster would overtake them before they were fully started.

He swung lightly upon the stallion, and leaning low from the saddle to watch the ground, sent King swiftly forward. The ground skimmed swiftly beneath them. It even seemed that the stallion knew where Little was headed and was taking him there without guidance. A hundred yards flew behind them and suddenly the stallion swerved to the side, shying from a dark object that was stretched upon the ground. And at the same instant, Bert Little saw the racer standing some hundred feet before them and waiting quietly for them to come up. He swung the stallion around and sent it prancing nearer, while he leaned over to study the thing that had frightened King. A second glance was enough. It revealed to him that the shadowy object was a man, lying face downward in the grass. Then, in that moment, Buck's absence that had allowed the man to come up and cut the rope he had hung from the limb was explained. This second man had taken the racer, and riding it, had led King away toward the entrance of the canyon. And Buck had followed to stop him. His success was only too obvious.

He rode on and catching up the reins of Billy's mount, turned back to the tree and rim of the bluff. He took the rope, and tying it as he had the other, dropped one end to the floor of the canyon. And he worked swiftly, for already much time had flown. He let down the end of the rope until it touched the ground, then he called softly:

"All right, Billy. I'll bring Beth up first. Tie it under her arms with a good, strong knot. Are you ready, Billy?"

He waited, balancing himself by lying flat upon the limb, but only silence answered him. And he frowned slightly, for he knew that his voice must have reached to the bottom of the canyon. Yet there was no answering pull on the rope nor even a word from below to let him know that he was heard. He dangled the rope, swinging it back and forth, and called again, a little louder this time.

"Doesn't it reach you, Billy? Is the rope long enough to come down?" But he knew it was. He could feel the lower end of it dragging upon the ground. And suddenly, when again nothing but a vast silence answered him from below, a conviction began to grow upon him that something had happened. Perhaps approaching danger had forced the boy and the girl to flee and hide. Perhaps even worse trouble than that had overtaken them.

With a grim-lined face, he swung from the limb and gripping the rope, lowered himself slowly and quietly into the pit of blackness below. He went down the full length of the rope to the ground and then, suddenly, from every side, men leaped out of the darkness upon him. By their very numbers and weight they crushed him down. Then a gun-butt fell upon his head with all the force of the man's strength behind it. A million lights broke before his eyes. And Bert Little sank into darkness.

CHAPTER VII

The Captives

WHEN Little regained consciousness, a strange world seemed to be buzzing around him. He seemed far off from all his surroundings. His head cleared slowly. Near him he knew there was a fire, for he could feel its warmth and see the faint glow of its blaze. And now and then he heard it crackle, as the

flames licked at a new piece of wood. It was behind him, somewhere, for lying on his side as he was, the heat was striking him full on the back. And it was growing uncomfortably warm. He rolled over on his face, completing the movement only after a great effort, for his hands were bound tightly behind him and his ankles tied and drawn up toward his hands. But he rolled over from the fire until he was lying upon his back, with his knees drawn up into the air.

He knew he was outside in the open canyon somewhere. He could feel the cool ground beneath him and he could see the hard, bright stars twinkling overhead. But he wondered why he had been left alone outside, with only the fire to watch him. He lay there, thinking over his helpless position, and his strange half-smile forced its way to his lips. He had fallen easily into their hands. He had dropped down from the rope and into their very midst. And they had taken him a prisoner without the slightest trouble. He wondered about the strange disappearance of Billy and his sister. Perhaps they had won to safety. But even as his thoughts turned to them, the low and gentle voice of a girl spoke beside him.

"Are you feeling better—now?" she asked.

He twisted about until he could see her and there, a little ways away, lay the girl, Beth Lansing, bound as helplessly as he himself. And as their eyes met, she smiled slightly.

"You, Beth?" said Little. "I was thinkin', aye, an' hopin', that you an' Billy'd got away. Where's Billy? Did they take him, too?"

"I don't know," said she. "We were waiting there for you in the darkness. You had hardly climbed the tree when Buck warned us that they were coming. Buck has the wisdom of a man. He did not bark, like most dogs would have. He merely looked in the direction from which they were coming and set his hair to bristling. That was enough of a sign for Billy. He must have learned a lot from you, for he was as wise as an owl. He understood at once what Buck was telling us and we started off through the thicket. But somehow, we became separated. Billy was following Buck along the base of the bluff and I was keeping close behind him. But the next thing I knew, I had lost them. The brush was so thick and it was so dark. I lost my directions and walked straight into the hands of these men. And that is how I am here."

"It was my fault," said Little, almost harshly. "I shouldn't have left you there alone. If I'd have stayed a bit longer under the tree, I'd have had an even chance with them, anyway. I'm only hopin' that Billy got away."

"Ah, no, Bert," said she. "It was not your fault. It was my own carelessness that placed me in their hands for a second time. You took me safely from them once, but I turned around and walked right back to them. It is my own fault, my own carelessness."

A silence fell. Bert Little lay there, looking up at the multitude of brilliantly twinkling stars and the pale face of the moon above him, his face grim lined and stern. And off to the side, the girl lay in her cramped position, her gentle blue eyes never leaving his face. She lay there as if in a dream, for she was seeing things in Little that she had never before even dreamed of existing. She knew that it was a fighter's code to lose as gamely as he won. But there was more than that about Little. There was a certain strength, a mighty calmness, about his bronzed face that would draw the eyes and hold them. There was something like a wild freedom about him, which even now in his helpless position he had not lost. And she sighed as her eyes rested upon him.

"Are you sorry?" she asked, in a soft voice. "Are you sorry, Bert?"

"Sorry?" said he, without turning. "What d'you mean?"

"Well, you went out of your way to help us. And we were only strangers to you. But you stepped right into the

midst of our troubles and now look where it has led you."

"Sorry?" repeated Little. "Aye, I reckon I am. But not the way you're askin'. I'm sorry that I've failed to do any more'n I have to help you. I haven't taken you outta your trouble. I reckon I've only made more for you."

"But it will probably cost you your life," she went on. "Doesn't that mean anything to you? These outlaws will kill you surely, perhaps even torture you, for the death of Coswell."

"Aye," smiled Little, grimly. "Mebbe they'll do all of that. But I'm not thinkin' of what is gunna happen to me. I'm wonderin' what's gunna become of you afterwards."

"There is something I want to tell you, Bert," she said, gently.

"Aye, what is it, girl?" said he.

"There isn't much chance of our getting free from here, is there? You might say the odds are pretty strong against it. Is that right?"

"Aye, that's pretty near right," said Little. "I dunno as I see much hope."

"Well, I wanted to tell you something while I still have the chance," said she. "I want to say that I've never known a man as great as you. I've never known anyone as brave or as ready to help someone else as you. And I thank you for all you've done for Billy and me."

He turned his head and looked at her. He was silent for a moment and then he said:

"There's a man comin' toward us from the cabins. Mebbe it'd be best if we wasn't talkin'. You know how it is." And that was the way he dismissed her praise. But she smiled softly to herself, still with her eyes upon him.

THE man came up beside the fire. He stood for a moment, sneering down upon Little.

"You've come outta it all right, have you?" he snarled, viciously. "Well, it's about time. We wasn't gunna wait on you all night. I was gunna use some fire on you an' see if that wouldn't bring you around. It's lucky for you that you've come outta it. We gotta surprise for you. We got something to show you that's gunna make you pretty near sick, I betcha!"

"Well, that's right nice of you," smiled Little. "Bring it around an' lemme see it."

"It'll wipe that smile from your face," snarled the man. "You can lay to that. It's gunna hit you harder than that pop on the head did. An' now mebbe you'd like to know who it was that gave you that tap. Well, it was my gun that hit you. An' it was me that was usin' the gun. I only wish I'd put more weight in that swing."

"Thanks, my friend," smiled Little. "Mebbe I'll find a chance yet to pay you back."

"A slim chance you'll have," snarled the man. "You'll be in hell inside an hour. An' you can be sure of that." He kicked Little roughly in the side as he walked past and then, turning, strode slowly back toward the cabins, laughing maliciously to himself as he went.

And thereafter Little fell silent. He had turned on his face again and the girl could see that he was working desperately on the bonds that held his hands behind him. She watched him, scarcely breathing, for upon his lips had come his strange, unfathomable half-smile. She lay there with her heart pounding with a new hope, for in that smile of Bert Little she saw a mighty courage that could only lead to success. Then at last Little spoke:

"Girl," said he, his voice husky with the great effort of his straining, "mebbe we've gotta chance yet. They've played the fool, these men of Coswell. They searched me, but they left me one of my knives. They didn't think to look beneath my belt an' they've given us a good chance of beatin' them. Aye. I can almost reach it. I've gained an inch on the ropes."

"Perhaps I can help if you can roll over here. Perhaps I can reach it for you."

But he did not answer her. He was straining with all his mighty strength at the bonds that held his hands. His iron-hard muscles rose and expanded across his shoulders. His body seemed to swell. The cords strained at his neck until they seemed on the verge of bursting. But still he kept on. Mere rope was never meant to stand such a mighty and incessant straining. It was made to throw a steer, with a quick, short jerk when it was snubbed around the pommel. But it was never intended to hold in check such a giant strength as that of Bert Little. It stretched, though in forcing that extra two inches into its length the three strands of rawhide cut deeply into the flesh of Little's wrists. But now he could reach his hidden sheath and pull forth the knife. And the girl sank back from her straining position with a sigh as she saw the gleam of its naked steel.

He turned it in his hands and a single touch of its keen edge slashed through the bonds that held his wrists together. He twisted on his side, and reaching down, severed the rope that held his feet. And there was Bert Little—a free man again!

"Bert! Bert!" cried the girl, suddenly, softly. "Hurry! They are already coming. I can see them—the whole crowd. Hurry. Perhaps we can run for it yet."

But Little only smiled, and to the girl's amazement, turned over again upon his back. He wrapped the severed bonds once more around his ankles and drew his feet up close to his body. Then, with the knife and his hands beneath his back, he lay there, apparently as securely bound as ever. But upon his face now was that strange and grim half-smile for which he was famed. And he lay there, waiting for the men to come up.

But even he felt the surprise that lay in wait for him. Six men trooped down to the fire and grouped around him. And one of that six stepped forward over Little. Little looked up at him and found himself looking squarely into the cruel, narrow face of Lafler Coswell, the outlaw leader whom he had thought dead. Coswell laughed, his narrow face twisting maliciously as he bent above Little.

"Surprised, are you, Little?" said he, and his voice was strong and full. "You thought I was dead, did you? Well, you made a bad mistake, my friend. It'll take more'n a knife thrust to end Lafler Coswell. And it'll take a better man that Bert Little to do it. Did you think you would have a chance against me? Even you, with all the fame they've given you? Look! See how easily you have fallen into my hands. See how the tables have turned on you. And you came here with the impression that you were a great fighter!" He tipped back his head and a long burst of silent laughter came from his thin-lipped mouth. Then he stopped for fear of reopening the wound in his chest. He leered at Bert Little.

"How is it, Little? How does it happen that here is the girl you were going to rescue so heroically? How does it happen that you are both here and at my mercy? I'll tell you! It's because you are a blundering fool. For once in your life you took hold of too big a job—when you came up against Lafler Coswell. And now you're going to pay for it. You're going to pay for it with your life!"

The grim half-smile had not faltered for an instant upon the lips of Bert Little. There were six against him and he had only the knife as a weapon. But he lay there with his mighty strength flowing and surging through his great body. He lay there upon his back, with his hands beneath him, and gripped the haft of his knife.

"Look well, Little!" cried Coswell, with a fiendish twist of his lips. "Look well. You won't have many more minutes in which you can use your eyes. And I want you to see that I'm wearing your guns belted around my middle. They're to be mine hereafter, Little. And I'll make them talk in a

different way than they have in the past.

"Now your time has come. You came here seeking my life. Well, I'm taking yours. I'm going to have your heart out, Little. I'm going to hold it here in my hands. And I'm going to tear it out with this knife of yours!"

He drew a knife from his belt. He stepped forward and leaned above the man whom he thought was helplessly bound. He leaned nearer, his long, narrow face hideous with his insane pleasure, the knife held poised and ready for its downward plunge.

And Bert Little waited. He waited, smiling, and took a firmer grip on the knife in his iron hand.

CHAPTER VIII

A Man is Made

WHEN young Billy Lansing found that he was alone in the pitch blackness of the thicket, with only Buck, the great dog, beside him, and with a band of men in that same woods who were seeking his capture or even his life, he was assailed by a qualm of fear. With Bert Little far out of calling distance on the bluff above, and with his sister lost, he felt as if all his power and his strength to stand and face his troubles alone had been stripped from him. He felt again as he had felt that afternoon when Judd Tolover had had him cornered, and with the rest of the boys to egg him on, had made him the butt of his cruelty. He remembered with vivid clearness how he had felt then; and now he felt his heart sinking in the same manner.

He crouched down at the base of a tree trunk, his balled fists rubbing away the silent tears that sprang into his eyes, blinding him. The gun at his hip was forgotten. The promise he had made above the grave of his father was pushed far from his mind. But that gnawing fear stuck. He knew that his sister was wandering somewhere in the thicket and that she, too, was alone. And that was the very thing that he had been warned to keep from happening. He could hear again that mighty fighter, Bert Little, telling him to guard Beth and to keep his gun ready in his hand. But how could he be expected to do that when his old fear leaped upon him, striking down all of his defenses? And how could he fight when there were such odds against him?

So he crouched there at the foot of the tree, listening to the pounding of his heart and trying to reason himself into believing he was doing the only thing he could. The big dog beside him whined and turned his head back in the direction they had come. And Billy, not knowing that Buck sensed Little in trouble, laid his hand upon the shoulder of the dog to quiet him. And again hot tears of shame stung his eyes as he realized his own weakness, for under his hand the mighty and powerful muscles of Buck quivered restlessly.

How long he stayed there in the darkness of the thicket, dreading to move lest he be heard and taken by some of the men, he could not guess. But after a while his body became cramped from his crouching position and he was forced to stand erect. Slowly, then, picking each step as he went along, he worked his way out from the base of the bluff. And after a minute or two he came to the edge of the thicket and looked out over the open of the canyon. There was the bright blaze of a camp-fire a hundred yards or so straight out before him. But from where he stood, it seemed to be deserted. Then he saw a man come out from the left where the cabins were and stop at the fire. He stood there, looking down at his feet, and then Billy made out a darker shadow lying along the ground near the fire. And off to the side a little was yet another shadow. And as he saw those shadows, the realization of what they were leaped suddenly through his brain. It left him dizzy with appre-

hension. It fairly froze his heart with a new and greater fear. For he saw that one of those shadows was his sister; and that the other was Bert Little! He saw at a glance that both of them were captives. And then the full meaning of it smote him. Bert Little was taken from him! He was left alone in the very stronghold of his enemies without a chance of escaping. His heart quailed at the thought. Here he was, with only Buck to aid him and with his chances of winning through growing slighter with every moment.

But Little was a captive and they would probably take his life. What would become of his sister he could not even guess. Then the man who had come out to the fire turned and went back to the cabins.

"Buck," said the boy. "There's Beth an' Bert Little over there. We gotta free them now or we won't get another chance. Come along, but follow behind me."

He started toward the fire, running, stumbling in his nervous hurry, yet wise enough to keep to the lowest hollows. But he was still some two hundred feet from the fire when he saw six men coming toward it. He dropped down in a shadowed hollow as if a bullet had touched him. And Buck, obedient to a friend of his master, paused beside him. The boy huddled there, his breath fairly frightened from him. And he watched the six men gather around Bert Little. A gasp of astonishment slipped from him when he saw that Coswell was one of them. And seeing that famous outlaw chief still alive after the knife of Little had plunged into his chest was enough to take the last of the boy's spirit from him. He dropped his face to the ground with a sobbing groan. He lay there and a shudder shook his small body.

And Buck came to him, nudging him gently with his muzzle. The boy raised his pale, strained face. He saw the great strong shoulders of Buck beside him. The great dog was looking off toward the fire, his long, mighty fangs bared in a low, rumbling snarl. His meaning was perfectly obvious to Billy. Buck was asking why he was not up and on his way to aid the master. And Buck, himself, was ready and willing to lead the way. The boy raised himself and stared across at the fire and the group of men around it. He saw Coswell step up before Little; and fear of danger for his friend turned his body cold. And this time it was not fear for himself! He stared for a long moment at Coswell, and all the while his face was losing its haggard, strained fear. And in its place was coming a mask of grimness, like cold iron. And all the while the consciousness of the gun on his hip grew upon him. And in that single and breathless moment the life of young Billy Lansing changed. It was the courage of Buck, the great dog, that started it. And it was the danger that those two out there by the fire were in that carried him on. So in a single stride he bridged the gulf that stood between him and manhood. And he found the code of a fighter. He found it without even knowing it, by merely forgetting his own danger and thinking of that of others. His young and sun-browned face had taken on a grimness like that of a mask of stone. He reached down and drew his gun, feeling the thrill of it in his hand race up his arm and through his body. And then the boy and the dog crept forward.

THEY had gained a point no further than fifty feet away when Billy saw Coswell lean forward with his knife poised above the chest of Little. And then he raised his gun. He picked out a spot on the temple of the outlaw. And then he pressed the trigger. That thundering report was like a signal to the boy and to Buck, for side by side they swept upon their enemies, a shrill cry of vengeance ringing from the lips of Billy and a mighty snarl rumbling from the throat of the great dog.

Bert Little was lying there upon his back, watching the hand of Coswell and waiting to jerk his own knife from beneath him. But when that thundering shot came, it was as if he had been expecting it and was ready to leap into action. The body of Coswell lurched forward, crashing full across him. The poised knife fell from his clutching fingers. But already Bert Little was leaping upward. He caught his guns from the dead man's sides and even as he came to his feet a hail of death was flaming from their muzzles. Havoc and confusion and destruction swept through the ranks of the five outlaws. The guns of Little were speaking with the incalculable speed of magic, seemingly one drawn-out, continuous roar. And not a slug of lead failed to reach its mark. Then there was Billy and Buck, flashing in from the side. They comprised a trio that would crush the heart from the strongest. They were three grim death-dealing fingers. And death was swift in striking.

Suddenly, it was over and those three stood alone. The snarling of the great dog ended. Quiet reigned. The eyes of Billy and the eyes of Bert Little met. And over the face of Little came his well-known slow, strange half-smile.

Half an hour later they had again gained the bluff above the canyon. It lay below them, wrapped in dark shadows and silence. Death, indeed, seemed to have taken it and wrapped it in a cloak of mystery.

Bert Little lifted the girl to the back of the racer and helped Billy up behind her. Then he handed Billy a bulking sack.

"I took this money from Coswell's cabin," he said. "It's rightfully yours. Coswell wrecked your home an' you won't want to go back to it. So take the money. It'll give you a start with another home. Ten miles over the hills there, you'll find Santez. I'm advisin' you to go there. You'll like the town, I reckon. It's not like Mesquite."

"But what of you?" said Beth Lansing. "After all you've done for us, are you going to leave us?"

"I'll see you in Santez one of these days," said Little. "But you go on ahead. You'll meet with no more trouble, now. Find Sheriff Lew Owens an' tell him I sent you. Lew will set you up. An' there's a good school there."

"Goodby for a time, then," said Beth.

"Aye, so long," smiled Little.

"So long, Bert," said Billy, fighting hard to keep his voice from being husky.

"Aye, Billy! Keep on like you started tonight an' some day men will hear of you."

The slim-legged racer stepped daintily up the slope, carrying the brother and sister. And Little stood there with King and Buck beside him, and watched them go. Then, at the top of the slope, they turned, and he waved his hand slowly in farewell.

Next Issue

BERT LITTLE

and the

BRANDED SPURS

Complete Texas Border Novel

By Clyde A. Warden

Cowhide Savvy

Mace's fist whipped out in a swishing arc!

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "Colt Collect," "Robbers' Rodeo," etc.

Young Mace Bronson wasn't up to the latest Colt tricks—but he sure did savvy cowhide stunts!

PING! A small stone whizzed past Mace Bronson's head within an inch of his straight, sunburned nose. Had the missile struck the unsuspecting Arrow range rider it certainly would have knocked him cold. As it was, Iron Foot, the superb steel-grey pony between Mace's knees, snorted and leaped ahead, to be reined up instantly while the rider, with ready Colt in his right hand, searched the vicinity with keen dark eyes.

A close observer would have noticed that Mace was a trifle slow in drawing his weapon. While an expert cowhand in every other respect, young Bronson was not a gun-wizard. Furthermore, once his own gun was out, he was extremely reluctant to shoot at any human target.

At the present moment the puncher from the Arrow outfit had no idea why anyone should hurl a rock at him. The locale, new and strange to him, was rough range territory lying far to the west of the great Arrow ranch. Young Mace Bronson had been sent to this particular "neck of the woods" to see if any Arrow cattle were mixed with the other range cattle here.

Now the cowboy caught a fleeting glimpse of a human figure vanishing from view on top of the ridge at his right. In the wake of this figure, up

the brush-covered slope, Mace sent Iron Foot at full speed. When the puncher gained the crest of the ridge he found himself gazing across a broad, sage-brush flat, dotted here and there with cattle. Of the fugitive, however, for a moment he saw nothing.

It was Iron Foot who located the rock-thrower's hiding-place in the midst of a thick cluster of sage brush. The steel-grey's pricked-forward ears indicated as much to Mace.

"Come out of it!" barked the puncher, leveling his six-shooter.

To his astonishment a ragged figure with a floppy old hat pulled down to the eyes sprang up out of the brush.

"Shoot if you want to," came a sweet, defiant voice. "I am just sorry I didn't cave your head in with that stone."

"And why?" returned the amazed range rider.

"Because you're one of Ed Lindsey's cowboys, of course, and they're all—well, it takes my Dad to tell exactly what they are, and I don't want to repeat it."

Mace surveyed the defiant little figure steadily. Freckle sprinkled was the face, a few curls strayed from under the big hat, and the patched and ragged shirt and overalls looked as if made out of larger garments. But one glance did not satisfy the cowboy. Something mystifying about it. Suddenly the truth broke upon him. It was a girl who stood before him, and a very appealing one, too.

"You've got me wrong," he began, but the girl broke in hotly:

"You are going up this gulch right now to join that brute, Ed Lindsey, and the two toughs he's got with him. You know they're at my Dad's shanty. It's around the bend in the gulch, not far away. They're raising an awful row with poor Dad about a beef critter."

MACE whistled softly. "Good thing you slipped away, isn't it," he inquired, interested greatly by this strange encounter.

"I should say it is. I stole out the back door and up the ridge without that brute, Lindsey, seeing me. He always gives me the shivers the way he looks at me. I was going to—"

"To what?"

"To try and get help," defiantly. "Though I don't know where we would get help unless it would be in town where mother is staying on account of sister's being sick. She's younger than I am, Sis is, and not very strong. We're worried—"

Suddenly the girl's voice choked.

"Say, what am I telling you this for, after I tried to knock you out with my rock?" she resumed. "I saw you coming and thought, 'Here's where I fix one of those dirty coyotes that had been pestering Dad and all of us!' I am pretty good at throwing rocks and balls. Dad says I'm all the boy he has," with an embarrassed flush.

"Do I look mean and tough?" Mace inquired, flashing his winning smile. He wanted, so much, to win the friendship of this brave little girl who was interesting him not only in herself but in all her family.

"No, you really don't," said the girl, after a moment's scrutiny of the puncher's face and figure, the figure of a powerfully muscled rider who sat before her with the grace of the range-raised cowboy. "If I wasn't sure you were one of Ed Lindsey's cowboys—"

"But I ain't one of Lindsey's men. I don't even know the geezer nor any of his toughs." Mace holstered his Colt and swung off. "Won't you believe me, Miss? What shall I call you?"

"I'm Barbara Phillips, but everyone calls me Bab."

"Well, Bab, from what you've told me, you don't need to look any further for help. I'm for you and for your family right now!"

"You're not, you're really not one of Lindsey's men, after all?" queried the girl. "Somehow, I am sure now that you're not, because you're—you're genuine. But can you ever excuse me for throwing that big rock?"

"Forget it! We're friends, Bab. We're more than friends, we're going to be pards. Shake on it."

They shook hands gravely, the girl somewhat embarrassed, but her lingering suspicions rapidly melting away at the firm hand-grasp and steady, kind eyes that smiled so radiantly at her.

"Now," suggested the rider for the Arrow outfit, "suppose you tell me all about the trouble at your place."

"We came from Kentucky," the girl began. "Dad—his name's Henry Phillips—wanted a little ranch in Colorado, and the doctor said if—"

"That can come later," Mace interrupted gently. "Your Dad's homesteading in the gulch yonder and Lindsey is trying to run him out, is that it?"

"No, that's not the way of it. Dad bought the land, three hundred and twenty acres, with the cabin, corral and shed on it, and water too. Ed Lindsey was mad as hops when Dad didn't buy from him. He's come to our cabin three times and made threats. But I didn't quite understand. But Dad was worried terribly. Then this morning there was a beef carcass hanging under the shed and lying near was the hide."

"I savvy," put in Mace, his face suddenly grim. "And you hadn't killed this beef."

"No, we hadn't killed it and Dad couldn't understand how it got there. We have cattle grazing close around here. We bought 'em with the ranch Our brand is Slash R. We need meat all right enough, as well as lots of other things, since Dad and I are all alone, and I'm not such a good cook as mother. But, do you know, the brand on that hide in the shed wasn't our brand at all?"

"It was Lindsey's brand, eh?" ejaculated the range rider, the hue of rage suffusing his rather good-looking brown face. "And now Lindsey and his two toughs are telling your Dad about his having butchered one of Lindsey's cows. Have I guessed it right?"

"This time you have, but how did you know?" with a sudden return of suspicion, "if you're not one of Lindsey's men?"

"I've seen such things before," returned Mace. His teeth clicked shut grimly and he inspected his Colt .45. "Now, Bab, you stay out of sight and keep out of this. I'm going to put my finger into this Lindsey pie."

Abruptly, the puncher swung to Iron Foot's back and galloped up the ridge. The girl gazed after him in something of amazement. Then determined that she was going to see what happened, Bab followed horse and rider, curls flying under the floppy old hat, little feet adroitly picking out the best path through the sage brush.

MACE BRONSON reached a point where he could see a fenced meadow in the gulch below, which had here widened out. In the meadow at the foot of the ridge was a substantial cabin, across the yard from it a corral and shed. The open side of this shed, however, as the cowboy observed, did not face the house itself. Three mounted men were in the yard and confronting them one man on foot, who seemed to be almost a prisoner.

The Arrow rider hesitated. Possibly it would be best if he remained unseen for the time being. He rode back from the crest of the ridge until Iron Foot would not be in sight of the cabin, swung off, left the horse with bridle reins a-trail and descended the hill on foot. Behind the cabin Mace paused and the voices of the men in the yard reached his ears.

"Phillips, the case is dead open and shut agin yuh." It was an ugly voice and held a menacing note. No doubt

this was Ed Lindsey himself speaking. Mace essayed an exploring glance and saw a pugnacious, bullet-headed man sitting solidly on a little bay horse.

"Overbearin', contemptible cuss," was the range rider's silent comment. He craned his neck farther and whispered: "Couple of hard-bitten pills with him. The kind as don't say much but'll do whatever their boss sez. Henry Phillips' shore up against a tough proposition."

"*Dead open and shut,*" Lindsey repeated emphatically. "We've catched yuh, practically red-handed, a-beefin' one of my critters. That thar fresh hide has got my Lazy H Circle brand right on it, plain enough for even a duffer like yuh to see and recognize."

"But I still say I didn't butcher your cow," returned Phillips defiantly. "Go get the sheriff. I know it looks bad, but you'll get no money out of me."

"We won't, huh?" snarled Lindsey. "Now, look here, this evidence'll railroad yuh right to the pen. Not a doubt about that. Then where'll your family be? What about that sickly wife of yourn an' the ragged little kids you seem so fond of? Bab's pretty enough though—"

Phillips voiced a choking sound of rage and Mace knew the man was more than worried and distressed. Changing from his reference to Bab, Lindsey continued: "As I've said afore, yuh can save them—yore poor pitiful family—from all that misery, and yuh can keep outa the pen yourself if yuh'll just fork over to me that thousand dollars I know yuh have got left after buyin' in here. Yep, pay me that thousand bucks and I'll keep mum about this ugly business. Yuh can eat that beef and I'll take the hide home and never say a word about it, nor about you bein' a cow thief. And yuh can go right on makin' a livin' for yourself and family. How 'bout it?"

"Of course you knew how much money I had," retorted Phillips, bitterly, "for I tried to deal with you on a piece of land before I dealt with Peterson. But that thousand dollars you mention—the last money I have—I promised to pay to Peterson on the cattle. I've made a deal for the cattle, but haven't paid Peterson in full because he is to gather and tally them. Lindsey, I won't pay your price."

"Then, by thunder," Lindsey bellowed, "we'll rope the sheriff in on this. I've offered yuh a way out. Yuh won't take it, so—"

ABRUPTLY the man broke off, his eyes starting from their sockets. His face blanched, then flamed, for around the corner of the cabin, with drawn Colt, had stepped the Arrow cowboy.

"Set tight, fellers," Mace snapped. "I'm takin' a hand in this game. I'll bet forty dollars against the hide off-en a mangy coyote that you hounds killed that beef yourselves. Ye-ah, and now you're tryin' to frame—"

"Yuh ain't no proof!" bellowed Lindsey. "And the evidence is agin Phillips. He shore done it. Yuh can't prove he didn't!"

"Perhaps not," retorted Mace. "Jus' the same I'm talkin' to you curs in language you can savvy—six-shooter language. Shuck outa your belts and drop 'em, guns and all. I'm goin' to make you hombres take that evidence—the beef, hide and all—off this ranch. Ye-ah, and the offal, too. Then you'll shut up an' behave yourselves or I'll smoke you plumb outa the country."

The Arrow rider knew he was making a wild threat, one he could scarcely hope to make good on, but he was furious through and through, and more than determined he'd cow this bunch of crooked scoundrels and make them dance to his music—at least for the time being.

Lindsey blustered and swore, but began fumblingly to unbuckle his belt. So did his two crafty-eyed henchmen. Henry Phillips, a slender,

oldish man; thin-faced, grey around the temples, had stepped back towards the cabin, apparently too astonished for speech. Mace, however, had eyes only for Lindsey and the other two surly fellows who released their gun belts and dropped them to the ground.

"Back your broncs so I can get that hardware," the puncher commanded, and as the three men obeyed he stepped forward, and stooped to pick up a belt. Thus, for a second, he was not watching his foes.

Suddenly a gun, which one rider had been carrying concealed in a shoulder holster under his vest, was whipped out and fired in the same instant. It was the work of a finished gunman, who was lightning on the draw and a dead shot. The slug from that gun struck the Arrow rider's weapon at its cylinder, hurling the .45 from his hand and numbing his entire arm. So swiftly, so unexpectedly did it happen that Mace did not know any one of his adversaries had a gun until it roared and he found himself weaponless.

"Set tight yoreself!" snarled the gunman.

WITH the words Lindsey and his other man voiced exultant whoops, leaped from their saddles and pounced on the puncher. He fought them fiercely but uselessly. In a moment he was flat on his back, held down and helpless. Phillips had been too dumbfounded to take any action whatever, even had he been so minded. He now stood as though frozen in his tracks while the gunman rode forward and looked down at Mace through slitted eyes, as cold as a snake's and as cruel. He spoke boastfully:

"Younker, yuh had orter knowed better'n tuh try an' go up agin Art Crossley. Mebbe, though, that name don't mean nothin' to yuh."

Mace stared up at the most ruthless face he had ever seen. Art Crossley's name had not meant anything to him, but it would from now henceforth. He would never forget this hombre.

"Wal, we're just where we was afore this nosey walloper butted in," Lindsey commented. "Phillips, are yuh goin' to take up our proposition, or ain't yuh?"

"Your proposition is nothing but robbery," the rancher returned, still defiant. "I've far more respect for an out-and-out bandit," vehemently. "I'm glad to see I have one friend, even though you snakes have got him foul. No, Lindsey, I won't pay your 'price'."

"Then—then," blustered Lindsey wrathfully, "we'll get the sheriff. Yuh'll go to the pen, Phillips, sure as that beef hide's got my brand on it. That's the evidence as'll cinch yuh . . . Yarmouth," addressing his second man, "you go for the sheriff, quick as we get this meddlin' buckaroo tied onto his hoss. Wharat is his hoss, anyhow?"

Lindsey tied Mace's hands, while Yarmouth went to look for the range rider's horse. Eventually he returned, reporting angrily, "I found his dang hoss but I couldn't catch the critter."

Lindsey swore, and Crossley made sarcastic remarks about "any cowboy what couldn't catch a hoss—" He, Art Crossley, would go and bring in the bronc.

"Well, we got to have this snoop's hoss," commented Lindsey. "So you go fetch 'im, Crossley."

The discomfited Arrow cowboy did not think Crossley would succeed in catching Iron Foot, for the steel-grey was strictly a one-man horse, instinctively distrusting all men except his master. But somehow, Crossley did succeed and finally came back leading Iron Foot.

"Orneriest mustang ever I seen," the gunman commented. "Showed fight, he did, but I know how to handle his kind. Yeh, I noosed him

'round the front feet an' busted him wide open."

The smoldering fire in Mace's eyes seemed to please Art Crossley, who realized how this cowboy hated to have his horse abused. Lindsey and Yarmouth boosted Mace to Iron Foot's back and tied him to the saddle.

"What are you scoundrels going to do with my unknown friend?" Phillips demanded. The slender rancher, evidently realizing how absolutely useless it would be for him to try and turn the tables, had made no attempt to interfere.

"Aw, we ain't goin' to harm him none," returned Lindsey. "Phillips, I'm goin' to stay right here to see that you stay here, too. Yarmouth's goin' to town fer Sheriff Holmes, and Crossley is to take this interferin' cowpoke away from this here ranch and turn him loose. We could make it hot fer him for pullin' a gun on us, but I'm not goin' to be hard on the doggoned walloper."

The expression in the big, brutal man's eyes gave the lie to his words, and they did not deceive Mace. He realized plainly that something extremely disagreeable was in store for him. This impression was further confirmed when he saw Lindsey draw Art Crossley aside and whisper a few words to him. The gunman nodded his head understandingly, though he made no reply.

Crossley led Iron Foot away towards the south, in a few minutes passing from sight of the ranch buildings. They then crossed an open flat, where Mace saw several small bunches of cattle and noted on some the Slash R brand. He recalled that Phillips said he had bought these cattle, even though they were not entirely paid for, and an idea connected with the cattle and the brand entered his troubled mind. It was, in fact, a desperate scheme for confounding the plans of Ed Lindsey—if only the captured Arrow cowboy could put it into execution.

There seemed no hope of doing this, for Crossley now vouchsafed some information. "Lindsey told Phillips he was goin' to turn yuh loose. Humph! My boss was talkin' smooth for that nester's benefit. Yuh ain't goin' to get loose. Yuh're too previous with your gun and too dang meddlesome. Lindsey ain't goin' to have no witness like you to come appearin' agin him. Not much. I'm goin' to take yuh to a deserted shack where there's an old well and I'm goin' to throw yuh down into that well!"

The words were uttered with a cold-blooded brutality that made Mace shiver. No use asking the man for mercy. Crossley was evidently a killer who thoroughly enjoyed killing. The Arrow rider blamed himself for having gotten into such a predicament. Not that he should not have intervened in Phillips' behalf, but he should have watched Lindsey, Crossley and Yarmouth more closely. He should not have been such a duffer as to have let himself be taken prisoner.

Now, unless he could escape, he was to be ruthlessly murdered, and Henry Phillips would go to the penitentiary for butchering a Lazy H Circle animal. The evidence against him was convincing indeed. What of the family of the friendless and undoubtedly feeble rancher—the mother who was not well, the sick little girl and that fearless, splendid Bab? With the father behind bars they would be helpless. Pitiful. And Mace Bronson probably would never again see the girl in whom he had so quickly become interested!

MACE thought of young Bab. Where had the girl hidden herself? He had not seen her since he had caught sight of her following him down the ridge. But courageous as she was it was very probable that pretty little Bab had witnessed all that had taken place. She would try to do something,

too, to help, if Mace was any judge of the girl's character.

Crossley led the way slowly over a hill and down into a deep gulch, at length reining up before an old cabin with a well directly in front of it. Beyond the well, some twenty paces, was a prairie dog town. It was the peculiar sharp bark of the unique little animals which first attracted Mace's attention, and upon seeing fully a dozen of them scampering about the helpless cowboy had a sudden inspiration.

"Crossley," he said tauntingly, "you figger you're some shot with a six-shooter, don't you?"

"I know I am," retorted the killer, instantly belligerent. He had reined up in front of the old shanty and had swung from his mount. "I'm the best danged gun-slinger from the Border to the Canadian line."

This was exactly what Mace had counted upon—the killer's pride in his ability with a Colt.

"Blah, blah!" scoffed the range rider. "I'll bet you can't knock over that prairie dog settin' right on the edge of his hole."

Crossley's slitted eyes flashed. Quite evidently, this being taunted was something he could not stand. "Jus' a second and I'll show yuh!" he snarled.

Approaching Iron Foot, he yanked the horse, savagely, violently, and somehow forced the animal to stand quietly while he released Mace from the saddle and dragged him to the ground.

"Now you stand right out thar," growled Crossley, "and I'll show yuh a trick or two with a gun."

Mace's feet were now free, but his wrists were tied in front of his body. He was not so utterly helpless as he would have been had they been tied behind his back. He hoped the killer could be induced to empty his Colt, then Mace would leap to Iron Foot's back and before Crossley could reload, the pony would be out of six-shooter range.

"Hombre, you can't show me anything," Mace jeered. "There are a dozen prairie dogs there, easy marks. I'll bet you can't hit six of the dozen with six shots."

For answer Crossley's Colt flashed fire and smoke, boomed and roared. He was using both hands, fanning the hammer and shooting with uncanny speed. Four shots and only one prairie dog was hit. Crossley cursed as he fired two more shots. He had now hit three dogs, missed three.

THE range rider was all set to leap towards Iron Foot as that sixth shot roared out, but he did not move, for Crossley whipped out another six-shooter. This from the waistband of his overalls and Mace had not known the killer had it.

"You think them prairie dogs is so dang easy to hit, you jus' try it." Crossley rasped. "Makin' fun of my shootin'—How can you shoot, huh? I scored three hits. Here, use the same gun I was usin'."

"Ho, ho, I can show you up, all right," taunted Mace. He doubted if he could beat Crossley's marksmanship. But anything to delay his own death.

"If there's any sport about yuh, yuh'll untie my hands to give me a fair chance."

The killer released Mace's wrists, handed him the empty Colt and one loaded cartridge, then took his own stand directly behind the puncher, his fully loaded weapon pressed against the range rider's back. Under such conditions Mace had no chance of turning the tables. He aimed at a prairie dog that sat up on the edge of its hole, and scored a hit.

"Sure I can beat yuh all-holler a-shootin', Crossley. You ain't so much," taunted the cowboy. "In fact yuh're about a fourth rate gun slinger."

"If you make four hits outa six shots yuh can crow," retorted the furious killer, handing Mace another shell.

How Mace hoped the fellow would relax his vigilance, so he could turn the gun on him, but Crossley was taking no chances—yet. One cartridge at a time, the killer furnished the range rider, and out of six shots Mace scored four hits.

"Yuh beat me!" snarled Crossley. "Who'd ever a-thunk a young squirt like you— Aw, I was shootin' too fast. I'll shoot slow now and show you how it's done. Gimme that empty gun."

Mace handed over the Colt and Crossley, stepping back from the puncher, holstered his loaded weapon and began to reload the other. The Arrow range rider waited for no better opportunity.

Like a flash he leaped toward the killer. But Crossley with a motion no human eye could follow, whipped out his loaded Colt, levelled it:

"Stand back," he snarled. "Huh, I just knowed yuh'd try to work some shenanigan on me. Wanted to catch me off guard, didn't yuh? Wall, I'll tell yuh right now, no man ever catches Art Crossley off guard."

Mace stood still, a foolish expression on his brown young face. He'd tried so hard to get the best of this cold-blooded murderer and had failed!

"Just as well blow your brains out right now, and get it over with," said Crossley.

Unwaveringly Mace looked into the black muzzle of the six-shooter—looked into the face of death. Crossley's eyes were slitted, his finger was crooking on the trigger. This was the end of the trail for Mace.

BUT, just then, something hummed so closely past Crossley's left ear that it all but took the skin from that ear. The cowboy instantly knew what that something was—a rock; knew, too, who must have thrown it, Bab Phillips. Though he did not see her, she must be at the northeast corner of the old shack. She'd missed for the second time. Too bad, when this time she'd thrown at the killer!

Ah, was it too bad? Crossley's attention had been diverted. Undoubtedly fearing an enemy was behind him, the killer had pivoted. His eyes and his gun now sought the rock thrower. The Arrow range rider waited for no better opportunity, hesitated not an instant. Like a panther he leaped for Crossley. His left hand clamped the man's gun wrist; his right gripped the barrel of the Colt.

Bellowing roar of a shot which went wild! Before Crossley could fire again Mace had twisted the gun free. He had the weapon by the barrel, but no chance to use it, for Crossley, by sheer luck, kicked the Colt from Mace's hand. However, the killer's wild grab at Mace failed. The cowboy slid away. He wasn't going to let the powerful brute get his hands on him if he could help it.

Growling deep in his throat, Crossley rushed, his arms flailing like pistons. Mace waited for that rush, but leaped nimbly aside as the killer closed in and smashed two terrific blows to the man's face. For all the effect they seemed to have Mace might as well have hit a rock wall.

"I'll get yuh!" rasped Crossley. "I'll chuck yuh in that well alive."

But Mace dexterously eluded every charge, dodging to the right and left, circling about his antagonist. The while he sent in telling blows to Crossley's face, his chest, his stomach. Well the cowboy knew that if the big gunman ever got his powerful hands on Mace's throat it would be all day with him. Knew also, that his hope of winning this terrific battle lay in wearing Crossley down. Mace himself had always lived a clean and active life in the open air, while the killer had abused his huge body, had punished much bad booze. Already his breath came in panting gasps. His face was distorted with rage. He fought wildly, blindly; one idea in the back of his mind—to grab Mace, down him and kill him.

Out of the tail of his eye Mace saw Bab Phillips, in the open now, a stone gripped in her right hand. But she stood as though petrified, her eyes big and round and scared, her face tense, drawn. It came to the cowboy that he must win for her as well as for himself. But his fleeting glance at the girl spelled disaster. His spurs caught on a small sage brush. He tripped, went down.

"Got yuh," hoarsely grated Crossley, pouncing on the range rider. Eel-like Mace squirmed out from under the man's heavy body, just a second before Crossley's hands could close on his throat. Together they gained their feet, slugged toe to toe. No longer was Mace dodging. No, he was pressing the fight, unafraid of the killer's most terrific punches. For at last Crossley was winded, the strength was going out of his abused muscles. He tried to clinch, failed and Mace's fists thudded, right left, left right into the man's stomach.

THE killer grunted, doubled up in pain, his arms down. Mace stepped closer, sent an uppercut crashing to Crossley's chin. Sock! The blow landed. Crossley's head snapped back. He reeled, then measured his length on the ground. Over his body stooped the gasping cowboy.

"By golly, I've knocked him cold!" Mace exulted and turned towards Bab who was now coming towards him, relief and admiration reflected on her erstwhile strained face. He did not speak, but she did.

"I followed you," she said. "And I was scared—scared if I did throw a rock I'd miss, and he'd kill you and me both."

The little figure was trembling now that the danger was past. Mace put his right arm about her shoulders to comfort her.

"There, there," he whispered, and without knowing how it happened his left arm came to the aid of the right. He held her close. She looked up at him, whispering:

"I don't want you to kill anybody. He's not dead, is he?"

"Don't worry," said Mace. "He ain't dead, but he sure needed killin'. We'll tie the coyote up, Bab." But he held her for a minute longer before he did the tying. Then:

"You sure saved my bacon, little partner," Mace grinned at the girl reassuringly. "Everything'll be all jake now."

"Will it?" she answered dubiously. "I know you tried to help us, but I guess there's no use your trying to do any more. Dad's right up against it. Lindsey sent for the sheriff and he's got that beef and hide with Lindsey's brand on it to show how Dad butchered one of his cattle."

Again Mace's arms stole around Bab's shoulders. "Don't you worry, we can help your dad—we're goin' to. Yes, honey, we'll throw a monkey wrench into Lindsey's scheme . . . . I know you wear overalls, little partner. Do you happen to carry a jack knife?"

Bab's bright blue eyes looked into his trustfully but puzzled. "Yes, I got a knife, but why?"

"Never mind why, just yet . . . . You and me are partners. We're goin' to put the skids under that Lindsey hombre proper! We'll leave this killer right here. You get on the fellow's horse and let's hustle!"

He helped Bab onto Crossley's horse. She smiled down at him bravely. He smiled back, then swung to Iron Foot. They started out across the range.

AT THE Phillips ranch, the Slash R, Ed Lindsey sat on a nail keg in the yard keeping guard over Henry Phillips, who sat in front of Lindsey on the hard ground. They were waiting for Sheriff Holmes to arrive, but while they waited neither one of them paid any attention to the shed, wherein hung the carcass of a beef and where lay a fresh hide. The rear of this building was towards these two

men in the yard, the opening faced the other way.

Almost three hours passed before three horsemen rode into the yard, Yarmouth, Sheriff Holmes, and Peterson, the man from whom Phillips had bought the ranch and cattle.

"What's this Yarmouth's been telling us about your butchering one of Lindsey's cows, Phillips?" Peterson inquired, not unkindly.

"I never butchered one of Lindsey's critters!" expostulated Phillips. "Sheriff, I'll swear—"

"We'll look at the evidence," the officer of the law cut in grimly. "Show us to the carcass and the hide, Lindsey."

"Shore, I'll do it," exclaimed the arrogant Lindsey, leading the way to the shed. "Come on, all of yuh." He passed around a corner of the low shed, entered it, and grasping a hide which lay on the ground near the carcass of beef, began spreading it out.

"I'll show my brand, the Lazy H Circle, on this hide, plain as the badge on the sheriff's vest," he announced.

Peterson, Holmes and Yarmouth swung off and stepped up to the hide. Suddenly Lindsey ripped out an astonished oath, his face becoming absolutely blank. "What the heck?" he gasped. Yarmouth and Phillips were equally dumbfounded.

The brand on the hide was not Lazy H Circle. *It was Slash R!* Nor was there any other brand on it.

"Matter, Lindsey?" inquired Sheriff Holmes coolly. "You seem s'prised. This is a Slash R hide. So, accordin' to what Peterson has told me about his sale to Phillips, Phillips has simply butchered one of his own cattle."

"That's right," announced Peterson. "I sold my stock to Henry Phillips. He had every right to butcher one of 'em. There's no case for a sheriff here."

He gazed at Phillips and Lindsey, both of whom showed almost equal astonishment, but with a vast difference. Phillips' face was aglow with relief, while over Lindsey's heavy countenance came an expression of baffled fury.

He choked, seemingly unable to speak, but finally stammered, "I guess there ain't no evidence against Phillips. I—I guess I was mistook, sheriff."

"I should say you were!" snapped the officer, and looked up as two horsemen came into view.

"Bab, my girl, and my young cowboy friend!" exclaimed Phillips, in astonishment. "I've been wonderin' where Bab was so long today." The two on horseback drew nearer.

"Gosh, I'm glad to see you, puncher," cried Phillips, advancing toward Mace. "Sheriff, this is—" the slender rancher stopped.

"Name's Mace Bronson, from the Arrow," said the range rider. "Glad to know you, sheriff. I've got a killin' snake tied up over in the hills a few miles from here that I'd like for you to get. Will you come along?"

"Ye-ah. Seems I've got nothing to do here," said the sheriff, swinging into his saddle.

LINDSEY, who had been staring at the range rider and his companion as if he could not believe what he saw, noticed that Bab Phillips was riding Art Crossley's horse. His eyes, which had been resting on the girl with an evil, speculative look, suddenly filled with rage.

"Hi, you cowpuncher from parts elsewhere," Lindsey bellowed at Mace. "Yuh danged meddlin' walloper what's butted in whar yuh ain't no business, did yuh say yuh had a killin' snake tied up over in the hills?"

"You heard me correctly," retorted Mace.

"But, hells-bells!" rasped Lindsey. "Your hands was tied and Crossley's a dead shot! Yet—" He rubbed his hand across his eyes and looked again as if to see whether it was really Mace there in the flesh looking at him.

"Cowboy, what's Lindsey talkin' about?" inquired Sheriff Holmes.

"Nothin', nothin'. I ain't talkin' about nothin'," Lindsey fairly yelled. "Nothin' as concerns you, sheriff. Me, I got business t'home. Me and Yarmouth's got to ride. Pile offen that horse, kid," glaring at the girl. "It belongs to me."

"Take the horse and get off our place and never come back!" snapped young Bab, sliding to the ground. "We never want to see you again, Ed Lindsey!"

Yarmouth had already swung to his saddle. He seemed to be very anxious to be elsewhere. Lindsey now jumped on his pony and snatched up the reins of the animal Bab had been riding.

"Hol' on a jiffy, fellers!" snapped Sheriff Holmes. "Mace, do we want these two hombres, or shall I let 'em ride?"

"Let 'em go," said the Arrow cowboy.

Lindsey and Yarmouth lost not a moment in lashing their horses away from the Slash R.

"I've got a hunch that Mister Lindsey will close out his outfit quick as ever he can and pull his freight," said Mace to the sheriff as he and Holmes rode southward across the hills. "I told you to let 'em go because there's really no evidence against 'em strong enough to send 'em over the road."

"Hum? I'm plenty mystified," returned Holmes. "What about this 'killin' snake' as you call him, that you've got tied up?"

"Bad egg. I'm dead sure you'll want him," said the range rider and described Art Crossley.

"Whoop! You've made a catch," shouted the sheriff "That bird's wanted for murder in two states."

Meanwhile back at the Slash R Henry Phillips had turned to his daughter, demanding: "Bab, do you know anything about this cow hide? The one that was here this morning certainly did have Lindsey's brand, and now we find this hide has the Slash R on it. There's no evidence against us!"

"Mace and I killed a Slash R steer on the range," the girl explained, her eyes shining. "And Mace brought the hide in here and took away the other one. He hid it, too, so it wouldn't be found. Saved us, didn't he, Dad?"

Phillips gave his daughter a queer look. "Is Mace coming back?" he inquired.

"He didn't say," she answered. "But I think he'll come back, and I'll—" She hurried into the house without completing her sentence.

Henry Phillips had an idea as to what his daughter intended doing. Nor was he mistaken. When Mace Bronson appeared in the yard, the girl came out of the house. She no longer resembled a ragged boy. But, dressed in the best clothes she had, she was a radiant young woman.

Mace stared, then he grinned, and swept off his hat. "Didn't hardly know you," he stammered. "Not so long ago, I felt right chummy with you, little partner, but now I feel kind of scared."

She smiled at him, archly. "You scared? Why?"

"'Cause," Mace swung from his saddle, "Oh 'cause, I thought you were just a kid, but you ain't just a kid. You're a young lady, and so all-fired pretty—" he broke off.

Bab stepped up to him. "Cowboy, don't forget we're partners. And if you've found I'm older than I looked in boy's clothes, isn't that all right?"

"You bet it's all right," said Mace.

"I suppose you'll be going away, back to that outfit you work for," Bab remarked a bit wistfully. "But you'll be coming back some day, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll have to go back to my outfit, Bab. But I'll be comin' to see you often—oh, awful often. Bab, honey—"

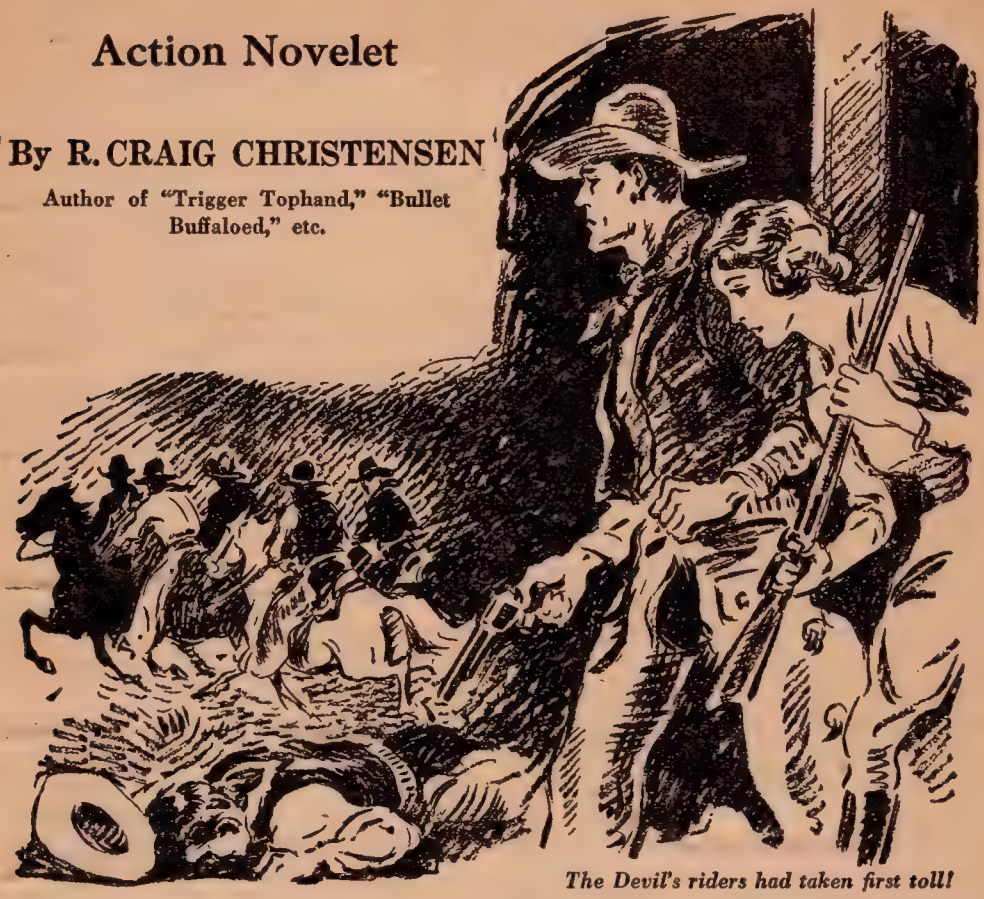
Again the cowboy broke off. He was very close to this adorable girl, and suddenly she was in his embrace. Her arms stole around his neck. Her radiant face was upturned to his.

Lazy Link, Lead-Master

Action Novelet

By R. CRAIG CHRISTENSEN

Author of "Trigger Tophand," "Bullet Buffaloed," etc.



The Devil's riders had taken first toll!

Up from the border country came Lazy Link Kilgore. An easy-going puncher with an easy drawl. And his sixes were easy, leaving their holsters—when a whole town of outlaws and city gangsters stacked themselves against a lone girl without guns or riders!

CHAPTER I

Devil Throp

A DEEP-THROATED, drunken laugh died on a high falsetto note. Voices, the shuffling of feet and clinking of glasses stopped. As if the world had ceased to move, a hushed silence fell within the Palace Saloon. The ticking of a tin alarm clock back of the bar sounded like a thundering noise.

A sharp crashing report roared out. Following it men's breaths hissed sharply between clenched teeth. Subdued curses, incredulous exclamations and gasps of surprise filled the barroom. Men moved their feet, shifting their position slightly. All eyes turned to two men in a little cleared space near a card table.

One of the men held a six-gun in his hand. Smoke was trailing in a thin, spiraling wisp from the muzzle, pointed at the barroom floor. Another six-gun swung from his hip, his left

hand hanging limply near it. On his young, immobile and deeply tanned face was neither smile nor frown. Only his steel gray eyes were alive. Like twin shafts of light they burned under bushy, straw colored eyebrows.

Facing him stood another man, nearly as tall, fully as tanned and also clad in range garb, with two holsters, one of them empty, the other holding a forty-five Colt. His right hand was gripped in the fingers of his left hand. His face was distorted by rage and pain. On the floor by his feet lay his other gun, shattered by the bullet fired by the other man. His eyes, of a grayish blue, besides rage and hate, held a certain amount of awe, of incredulity; as if what had happened could not have happened.

This awe and surprise was reflected in the eyes and faces of the goodly crowd within the barroom. Eyes were shifted from the two central characters, seeking those of neighbors, asking an unspoken question and seeing the confirmation that he knew he must find. A man voiced in a low whisper the thought uppermost in the minds of all:

"Dam'! Simon Trasher beaten to the draw an' disarmed by this stranger. How the hell—" The rest of the question trailed off into nothingness.

The young waddy with the gun removed his eyes from Simon Trasher. He let them flit over the crowd in a lazy, half impersonal manner, the fire in them having died out. He looked like he was mildly annoyed.

"Gents," he announced slowly and distinctly. "Yuh're entertainin' Link Kilgore, sometimes called Lazy Link. I'm from Texas an' a plumb easy cuss to git along with, mindin' my own business an' botherin' nobody. This slow gent here, whom yuh all call Simon Trasher, poked his nose into my affairs, demanded my past history, who I was an' what I was here for, where I came from an' where I was goin'. Sorta resentin' them questions as bein' my own pussonal business, I jes' told him I was sightseein' which led him to state I was through seein' things except mebbe what I might 'a' overlooked on the back trail. Not bein' ready to leave jes' yet, Trasher started gunplay with disastrous results to himself. Now, gents, I could 'a' shot him plumb dead an' it would 'a' been self defense. I didn't an' I'm askin' now if anybody here present feel like they're bound to take up his quarrel. I might say it's no use tellin' me to git outa Throp City 'cause I don't run wuth a dam'."

Hostility was apparent in the crowd that faced lanky Link Kilgore. Yet he delivered his long talk in a drawl that was almost weary, as if it was immaterial to him whether none or all wanted to take up Simon Trasher's fight.

A man pushed his way forward from the rear of the room. Tall and swaggering, with an insolent sneer about his lips, he stopped in front of Link Kilgore.

"I'm Donald Throp," he stated crisply. "Also known as Devil Throp. I own almost everything in this country an' what I say goes. Simon Trasher is my foreman an' he was questionin' you at my orders. Nobody can stay in this country unless they take orders from me. But I ain't one to drive out a good man, you can stay as one o' my waddies, I like 'em fast with a gun."

Lazy Link Kilgore twisted his lips into a thin, hard smile. His eyes narrowed perceptibly and the knuckles on his gun hand showed white.

"My guns ain't for sale," he snapped.

"All right, suit yourself," Devil Throp smiled, his voice silky. "As I said before, I give orders in this country, a word from me an' every gun in this room will be pourin' lead into your body. Better think it over."

"Yuh're wrong, Throp," a man who had been standing alone by the bar took a step forward. "Yuh don't give me any orders."

The face of Devil Throp went livid. A brittle oath fell from his lips and

for a moment it looked as if his talon-like fingers would clamp about the gunbutt at his side. With a mighty effort he controlled himself, turning back to Link who was watching with an amused smile.

"I'm talkin' to you," Throp snapped.

"Havin' made a liar o' yoreself already," Link grinned teasingly, "I reckon I'll let yuh give the order to fire. Only don't forget, I can scatter lead purty fast myself."

"You—you—I," Devil Throp half choked. "You got ten minutes to get out o' Throp City," he yelled."

Link Kilgore laughed softly.

"I'll meet yuh in fifteen minnits an' shoot a game o' pool with yuh—or any other game yuh care to shoot." He holstered his gun and turned to Simon Trasher. "About our game, yuh not bein' in shape to use a gun right now, the same invitation goes for yuh, any time any place. Link Kilgore aims to please."

He inclined his head toward the crowd, turned his back deliberately on them and walked from the saloon.

OUTSIDE he stopped on the sidewalk and rolled a cigarette. For a couple of minutes he stayed there, apparently absorbed in thought. Actually he wanted to see what was going to happen and he watched keenly, but without appearing to notice them, several men who came out of the saloon and made for the various business places in Throp City.

For another few seconds he remained on the sidewalk. Then he threw his cigarette away and crossed the street. Pushing open a door, he stepped into a hardware store. An undersized man with a limp moved toward him back of the counter, eyeing him keenly. Link laid a bill on the counter.

"Gimme four boxes o' forty-five shells," he ordered.

"Ain't got any," the storekeeper shook his head.

Link's eyes roved over the shelves. He pointed with his finger.

"What's that up there? That looks like a stack o' forty-fives."

"They're spoke for."

Another man entered the store. Link glanced up and recognized the man who had taken issue with Devil Throp.

"Gimme four boxes o' forty-five shells, Sanders," he ordered curtly.

"Er—ah—huh, yes, mister Croy." The storekeeper reached up and brought down the four boxes. It was plain he'd rather not have done so. The other man took them and pushed them over to Link.

"Here," he said. "Yuh can't buy anything in Throp City."

Link Kilgore whistled softly. He pushed the shells back.

"Oh, I see," he said slowly, "so that was what the men came out o' the saloon for. Well, I heard Throp say he gave orders in Throp City, howsomeever, he don't give orders where I'm concerned an' I buy my own shells. Here, gimme four boxes o' forty-fives!"

His right hand gun whipped out, the muzzle pointing at the midriff of the storekeeper. He hesitated for the fraction of a second, then he got a full view of the eyes behind the gun. He brought down four more boxes and Link stuffed them in the pockets of his chaps.

"I got a good many shells," he said to Croy. "But this country looks like it might be hard on lead."

"Yuh ain't driftin'?" Croy asked.

"I am not. I'm lookin' fer a job. Know where I might find one?"

"Yeah, but yuh'll be subject to a drygulcher's bullet every hour o' the day or night."

"From Devil Throp's men?"

"Yeh, from Throp's men."

"Lead me to the job—wait, I better stay the fifteen minnits an' meet Throp fust."

"He won't meet yuh. What might meet yuh is a bullet fired from inside some window. If yuh take this job

yuh'll have plenty of chance to meet Devil; it'll be the one move that'll gall him more'n anything else."

"That's a recommendation fer the job. Am I goin' to work fer yuh?"

"I'd like to have yuh but I can get along without yuh. No, I want yuh to work for a neighbor o' mine, a Miss Shepperd."

They had been walking toward the door. Now Link stopped Croy and caught him by the arm.

"Am I to understand Throp makes war on women?" he demanded softly.

"Yeh, on women an' orphans, it makes no difference to Devil."

They stepped outside. Link Kilgore looked toward the saloon.

"I suppose Throp is still in there. Yuh wait here a minnit, I want to see him."

Before Croy could protest, Link ran across the street, pushed open the saloon door and entered. A sudden hush fell over the room. Link walked to a table where Devil Throp sat with Simon Trasher.

"Devil Throp," he said measuredly. "I jes' wanted to tell yuh I am goin' to work fer a certain Miss Shepperd. Yuh can find me there any time yuh want to see me. Yuh might tell yore men I allus carry my guns an' Simon Trasher will tell them I know how to use 'em. Now, did yuh wish to say anything?"

A silence, as pronounced as before, fell over the barroom. By the table the eyes of Devil Throp and Lazy Link Kilgore clashed and held in a battle of wills. Link was unperturbed, almost bored looking. Throp's face was livid, his black eyes burned hatefully. His hands, the fingers closing and opening, lay on the table. In his chair Simon Trasher leaned back, his eyes on the face of Link, a peculiar, half-questioning look on his face.

For a full minute this silence endured. Then Link stepped back, his lips curled faintly in a half derisive smile. He turned his back and walked toward the door again. But his hands were close to his gunbutts and his eyes were watching Devil Throp and Simon Trasher in the bar mirror. Neither of them made a move and Link stepped outside for the second time.

CHAPTER II

Link Sends a Note

LINK went to the hitchrack, mounted his horse and joined Elmer Croy who was already mounted. Croy, possibly fifty, with a seamed face that bespoke honesty and courage, was watching the saloon door. Falling in by the side of the young waddy, he rapped out a question.

"What'd yuh do in there?"

"Told Devil Throp where he could find me, sorta callin' his bluff."

"Damn, man, ain't yuh got a mite o' sense. Yuh're a range man, yuh're used to meetin' yore enemies openly, fightin' yore fights face to face. That ain't Devil's way. Ain't yuh noticed nothin' peculiar 'bout some o' the people here? Didn't Sanders, the storekeeper, strike yuh as peculiar? Throp's men ain't all range men. Some are, but some are scum, city killers he's gathered 'round him. Sanders is one o' them, in the saloon was at least two others o' the same stripe. They don't meet yuh face to face. They lay in wait for yuh an' shoot from back o' a log or a gully. Devil Throp hires guns to enforce his orders, that's why he offered yuh a job."

"Who an' what is Devil Throp?"

"Devil Throp! jes' that. He's some spawn o' Satan who's got neither morals nor honor. What he wants he takes, if he's got to kill to get it, it makes no difference. He's a rancher but he's also a banker an' a storekeeper as he owns most all o' Throp City. The men he don't own outright takes his orders because they're in debt to him an' he could an' would break them in a minute. He carries on operations from his ranch, the Lucky Seven. What he says goes an' everybody knows it. He's ordered yuh out, now yuh're a pariah, no man

dares be yore friend, yuh're an outcast, fair prey for anyone who can bring yore scalp to Devil. There'll be plenty who'll try, he might offer a hundred dollars to the one who gets yuh."

"He don't hold me very high," Link laughed humorously. "But where do yuh fit in? I noticed yuh weren't afraid to talk to Devil."

"I'm different. I'm about the only one he hasn't got a hold on through money or some other means. I owe him nothin' an' I got a little ranch that I run with a couple o' men. I don't bother Devil 'cause I'm too small. For the same reason he ain't bothered me much—yet, I don't know when he might. But I'm like yuh, I don't take orders from any man."

They were outside of Throp City, riding at an easy gait. Elmer Croy bit off a chew of tobacco and resumed.

"Now here's what's goin' on. The Three Esses is a small ranch that takes in the foothills o' the Buckhorn mountains. It was started by old man Shepperd who filed on part o' the land. Shepperd was a prospector who thought there was silver in the mountains an' that's why he filed. When he struck his ore, he wanted to own the land.

"An' he did strike it. For five years he was takin' silver out o' his little mine with which he stocked the Three Esses. With some o' the money he sent his only child, a daughter, to school to be educated.

"Six months ago he died. He was found dead at the bottom o' the shaft. I believe Devil Throp could explain how the accident happened, for there is no doubt in my mind but what Throp killed him. Now Ellen Shepperd runs the ranch. That is, she tries to run it. Devil Throp wants it an' her. He has tried to force her to marry him an' failed. Now he's got her back to the wall. She can't work the mine. Devil Throp has taken possession, though he can't work it neither at the present time. He has got a fool injunction which prohibits Ellen from working the mine. She has appealed to a higher court. I don't know on jes' what claims he's got the injunction. Money talks for him.

"Devil Throp is money mad. He wants millions an' thinks he can make it out o' that mine, though it's only a small vein. He has some jail bird minin' engineer who's puttin' out engineerin' reports o' the richness o' the mine. Other hoodlums have been brought in by him. Racketeers an' crooked stock manipulators. I think they intend to sell stock in the mine an' swindle the buyers some way. They even got a shyster lawyer who watches things an' fixes 'em up legal.

"That's all. Nobody here dares fight Throp 'cause they're all in his pay some way or other. The only law we have 'round here is a deputy sheriff who's gettin' rich with the help o' Devil. When I saw yuh showin' yore teeth to Devil I nearly shouted, it struck me yuh could give him a battle. Now I dunno. I've thought it over an' mebbe I should not have let yuh ride to the Three Esses. The odds look too big. Say the word an' I'll go on alone while yuh ride yore way. Pussonally I'm neutral, I got to be, I'm too small to fight Devil. The gal's a trump, she deserves help but the job's too big for one man."

"It may be too big fer one man," Link Kilgore answered soberly. "I ain't sayin' that it might not be. But that ain't the question before the house, which is me. A certain Devil Throp ordered me out o' the country. I don't take that kind o' orders an' that makes it a pussonal fight between me an' Devil. If Ellen Shepperd can use me on the Three Esses, I'll take the job. If she can't use me, I'll keep on with my sightseein' till I whip Devil Throp or till he puts me under the sod."

"I expected as much," Elmer Croy raised two fingers to his hat brim in a semi-military salute. "I see where there will be plenty o' blood spilled on this range an' I shore hope it won't be yours. Now, it's fifteen miles to the

Three Esses an' we better speed up a little."

He set his horse into a lope and Lazy Link Kilgore easily kept pace with him.

IT WAS almost dark when Link Kilgore rode into the ranch yard of the Three Esses. He came alone, having parted from Elmer Croy two miles back. Pulling his giant sorrel horse to a halt in front of the house, he called a quiet, "Hello."

A door was pushed open. In the opening appeared a girl scarcely more than twenty-two. She wore riding clothes but had over them a flowered apron. On her hands were traces of flour and dough. Her face, olive-skinned and untanned, turned perceptibly paler at sight of Link and an uneasy gleam leaped into her dark eyes.

For a moment Link was struck by the picture she made. Then he realized she was afraid of him, thinking possibly he might be one of Throp's men. He raised his hat in deference.

"Pardon me, ma'am, I'm Link Kilgore. Elmer Croy is a friend o' mine an' bein' without a job he suggested I come here. If yuh can use a cowhand, I'll shore be glad to pitch in."

There was such sincerity and reassurance in the voice of Link that the girl never doubted his words. For a moment eager delight showed in her eyes. Then they clouded again.

"It's no use," she said resignedly. "Devil Throp will not let you work here."

"No, ma'am, he won't," Link smiled a little. "But he can't help himself. Yuh see, I done told Devil I was gonna work here."

"You told him! But how well do you know Devil Throp?"

"Not so well, ma'am, but he knows me purty well. He'll object, o'course, but he knows it won't do any good."

Ellen Shepperd shook her head, a half bewildered look in her eyes.

"I don't understand. You don't know Devil very well but he knows you quite well; you know he'll object and you say it will do him no good. Why, Throp dictates to the law even."

"Yes, 'm, but not the kind o' law I'm on speakin' terms with. Fact is, ma'am, I got a fight on with Devil an' I thought so long's I'm gonna stay an' settle it with him I might help yuh a little, Croy said yuh needed a mite o' help. He told me about yuh an' Devil Throp."

"He told you and you still want to stay?"

"Shore, ma'am, I'm stubborn thataway."

"It is hopeless," she shook her head. "But I am desperate enough to grasp at a straw; if you want to stay, knowing that your life is not worth a cent, I shall be glad to have you stay."

"That's settled then," Link nodded smilingly and dismounted. He led his horse to the corral where he watered and fed him. Then he went to the house and sat on a chair while the girl finished cooking supper. As she worked, she told him substantially the same story Elmer Croy had told him.

"I am licked and Devil knows it," she wound up. "I have spent my last cent appealing the monstrous injunction he secured and with the mine closed to me I have no chance. I can't keep men here, Devil sees to it that they don't stay."

They ate by lamplight, darkness having fallen. Link sat so he could look out through the window and he was the first to see a horseman ride up and stop. The girl heard the horse, turned her head to look and her face paled. She answered the question mirrored in the eyes of Link.

"Throp's man, one of his city killers. Throp has given me three days to make up my mind to accept certain terms of his. Today is the last day."

Link rose from the table.

"If the answer is no," he said, "I'll go out an' tell the gent."

He waited for no answer from the girl, reading it in her eyes. Hatless he went to the door and stepped outside.

"Did yuh want to see anybody?" he

asked of the rider, stepping down from the porch.

"I do. I want to see Ellen Shepperd," the man swung down from the saddle. "I might want to see you too," he added.

"Yuh don't need to see Miss Shepperd," Link barred the man's way. "She said for yuh to tell Devil the answer is no. Now, what did yuh want o' me?"

THE man stepped back. The lamplight from the window showed his face turning livid from fury. With incredible swiftness his right hand flipped upward and a streak of flashing light sped for the throat of Link.

It was arrested less than an inch from his neck. Moving even faster than the hand of the killer, his right hand shot upward, sinewy fingers that bit like steel circled the other man's wrist. Link twisted half around, heaved upward and the man flew through the air, landing on the ground a full ten feet away. He lay motionless, stunned from the fall.

Slowly Link walked over to him, picked him up and laid him across his saddle. With a rope he made him fast so he could not move. Then he went into the house.

"Yuh don't happen to have a pencil an' a piece o' paper?" he asked.

The girl, aware of what had happened, got paper and pencil, somehow it never occurred to her to question the unruffled, slow-moving Link. Sitting down by the table, he wrote a few lines and passed it to Ellen. As she read, an excited flush spread to her pale cheeks.

Devil Throp: Trasher was slow and clumsy. This man is no good when he is facing you. Best thing you can do is come over yourself and make peace. If you don't I'll come after you. Link Kilgore.

Slowly the girl's eyes lifted to the face of Link and something akin to a thrill ran through her at sight of the fierce, protective and yet savage expression in his eyes. It was a killer expression but of one who kills in a righteous cause and in fair fighting. The ojection on her lips died and instead she framed a question.

"You want to send this to Devil Throp with the man tied to his horse?"

"Yes, ma'am. I want to let Devil know he ain't runnin' things his own way. I want him to know he's up against a showdown. He'll git mad when he reads this an' a man who's mad don't allus use such good judgment. He might make some mistakes that'll help us."

He went out and stuffed the note in the unconscious man's pocket, then he slipped the reins over the saddle horn and turned the horse loose. He walked back into the house.

Ellen Shepperd looked up at him, a determined glint in her eyes.

"Devil Throp gave me three days to decide whether I'd marry him or take the consequences. He did not say what the consequences would be but a little imagination will supply the answer. I am surprised he did not come for his answer himself."

"I ain't," Link said, smiling a little. "He knew what he was doin' when he sent somebody else."

Link helped clear the table and wash the dishes, then he went out to the bunkhouse to sleep. He did not crawl into a bunk, instead he made a pallet for himself on the floor where he laid down without undressing. His gun-belts he hung on a nail but he kept one of his guns on the pallet, close to his hand.

CHAPTER III

SHOTS IN THE DARK

LINK KILGORE fell asleep immediately. Not because he was overly tired but it was a habit with him to sleep as soon as his head found a pillow. And he was not at all sure of uninterrupted sleep so he had to get rest when opportunity offered.

The crack of a six-gun awoke him.

In the pitch darkness inside the bunk house he sat up and reached for his gun-belts. As he buckled them on, other shots rang out and a thunder of hoofs drummed just outside in the ranch yard. He leaped to the bunk house door, flung it open. In his hands were his two sixes.

He saw nothing. The night was dark and made more so by an overcast sky. The riders he had heard had already passed through the yard, he could hear them in the distance, rapidly drawing farther away.

A perplexed look in his eyes, Link stepped away from the door, crouching down low so as to be less easily visible. He could not understand this procedure. Nobody would come tearing by in the night and fire six-guns without any reason, and no bullets had gone into the bunk house. It had the appearance of a trap to draw him away from the house and out in the open where he'd be a fair target for lead from anyone who happened to be lurking and watching for that opportunity.

He stood stock still, his head cocked to one side a little, his keen eyes peering intently into the darkness. He heard no sound and the night was so oppressively still that even ordinary breathing would be audible for some distance. A light flared in the ranch-house, the door was jerked open and the girl stood framed in the square of light. She called anxiously.

"Link? Oh, Link, are you there?"

Link did not answer. He could not reveal his presence if he wanted to and at the moment something had drawn his attention. The light from the door shone past the girl and faintly illuminated the ranch yard for some distance. Right on the fringe where this faint light was swallowed up in the darkness, an object on the ground had caught Link's eye.

He could not make it out in its entirety but what he saw was enough to tell him it was a man. The light was reflected from leather boots and a bit of metal that must be a spur. The way the legs were outflung indicated the man was either sleeping or dead.

Link pursed his lips, a calculating light coming into his eyes. This smacked more of the trap than ever. It would be a natural impulse for a man who saw this still form to rush over and investigate and lead could be poured into him from others hid beyond in the darkness. It was in line with the kind of rats Devil Throp had gathered about him. The man on the ground could even be clutching a six-gun and in the twinkling of an eye kill whoever stooped over him.

"Damn that Throp devil," Link muttered. "Now did—"

He broke off. From the house came a sharp exclamation, half prayerful, half fearful. Quick steps sounded on the porch and Ellen Shepperd dashed forward. Her eyes had discovered the outflung legs and heedless of consequences she ran toward the man, thinking it was Link. He raised his voice in a warning shout.

"Back, Ellen, get back to the house, it's a trick." He leaped aside as he shouted, swinging his guns up and letting his eyes flash in every direction. But the hail of lead he had expected did not come.

The girl stopped, a scant few feet from the sprawled form. She faced toward Link but could not see him in the darkness.

"Link, tell me, are you hurt?"

She did not wait for an answer. Curiosity and fear at the unknown and terrifying happening again drew her eyes toward the man on the ground. There was more light now. Before she had stood in the doorway, now the full flood of light gave added illumination. She was clearly revealed to Link and he saw her suddenly throw a hand to her throat.

"Croy! Link! It's Elmer Croy. He's dead!"

Link Kilgore leaped forward. That was no trap. Croy was an enemy of Devil Throp's. But how did Croy happen to be there? Why was he killed in

the Three Esses ranch yard? What devilment was back of this?

These questions buzzed through the head of Link as he flung himself down beside the prostrate form on the ground. He forgot them for the moment when a quick examination revealed that Elmer Croy was indeed dead. The fingers of his right hand still gripped a six-gun. Link picked him up and carried him to the porch where he laid him down directly in the lamplight.

The girl walked listlessly by his side, her eyes wide and horrified. "Dead!" she exclaimed. "Elmer Croy! Surely, it is impossible—it can't be true."

Link shook his head, a baffled expression in his own eyes.

"He's dead," he said slowly, straightened up. "He's got four bullets in his body. There were four riders. One was Croy, the other three the killers. Who they were we don't know but there is little doubt about them bein' Devil Throp's men. But why did they kill Croy? An' here o' all places."

"Look!" Excitedly the girl pointed at the body. "He has been searched. His pockets are inside out."

"I saw that an' it's another puzzle. The search must 'a' been hastily done as I was outside purty quick after the first shot. Looks to me like Croy was comin' here for somethin', whatever we can't even guess at. Three rannies were ridin' his tail an' caught up with him here. They let him have it, went through his pockets hurriedly an' fanned it again. It's got me stumped. Somethin' mighty important must 'a' brought Croy over, but what? It was likely to warn yuh an' me o' some move o' Devil Throp's an' it was serious enough to make Croy risk his life. But what could he be carryin' in his pockets?"

The girl, her hands hanging listlessly by her side, stared off into the darkness. An apathetic, half-forlorn look was on her face. With an effort she roused herself.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "It is terrible. I've fought and worked and slaved here trying to hold the Three Esses because it's the only thing I have. I have the mine but Throp has money enough to keep that in court till I am ruined. I can't run the ranch alone and he won't let me keep any hands. I guess I am done for."

"No, ma'am, not yet." Link shook his head stubbornly and his voice was a little husky. "We know somethin's afoot an' we got to watch out. We ought to notify the authorities o' this murder but I can't leave now. I reckon the best thing to do is to take Croy's body home an' let his men tend to the details. I'll ride over now."

"I am coming with you," Ellen said. "I have never been a coward but this has unnerved me. I am afraid to stay here alone."

"All right, I'll get the horses."

IT WAS pitch dark when they arrived at Croy's ranch. Link's shout brought men from the bunk house and to them he explained what had happened, turning over Croy's body to them. They were inclined to doubt him and were frankly hostile until Ellen Shepperd affirmed the story. A man saddled up to ride to Throp City to notify the sheriff. Link turned to the girl.

"Mebbe yuh better ride in with him an' stay in the city a couple o' days," he said. "Yuh might be safer there."

"No, I wouldn't be," she objected. "Devil Throp owns everything and everybody there. He need only say the word and whoever I stayed with would turn me over to him. I'll be safer at the Three Esses and near you than anywhere in the world."

"That's so, too, I reckon. Well, let's mosey back."

They started back and the four mile ride was covered in silence. What passed in the head of the girl Link had no way of knowing, but he knew she was wrestling with some problem. For himself he was trying vainly to

figure out what could have brought Elmer Croy on his death ride. But that question defied all answers.

The buildings of the Three Esses lay in a little hollow and as they gained a low eminence from where the buildings first were visible, Ellen Shepperd let out a low exclamation.

"Look," she p o i n t e d excitedly. "There's a light in the house. There! Now it went out. Somebody is there."

"Keep back, I'll investigate!" Link yelled the words over his shoulder, setting his horse into a fast run.

A hundred yards from the house he stopped, swung from the saddle and ran forward afoot. But in the ranch house yard everything was still. He listened and far off over the range he heard the faint drumming of hoofs. He pushed the door open, stepped inside and lit the lamp. The chimney was still warm.

A look around revealed that somebody had been in the house. The room was in confusion. Drawers had been opened and their contents were strewn about on the floor. He stood in the middle of the floor, gazing meditatively about when the girl entered. Inquiringly her eyes sought his.

"Another puzzle," he answered her unspoken question. "Somebody was here. They were after somethin' but what? It's my guess that Elmer Croy was bringin' somethin' here, that's why his pockets were inside out. They didn't find it on him an' thinkin' we might have got it they came back an' searched the house when we rode away. Of course, they didn't find what they wanted because it wasn't here. That bein' the case, where is it an' what is it? If we knew that we'd know why Elmer Croy was killed."

Wearily the girl sank down in a chair. Helplessly her eyes roved about the room. But she did not see the disorder in her things. She saw nothing and Link knew that the question that had been occupying her mind on the homeward ride was again bothering her. Silently his probing gaze rested on her. At length she spoke.

"This is Devil Throp's work, no doubt of that," she said. "Maybe not Devil himself but some of his men, sneaking city rats that they are. It means the end for me. He is too ruthless to let up now. It means the end for you too. You're a fighter, you've got courage but you cannot fight dirty as Devil fights. There is only one thing for you to do and it is natural that you will do it."

"What d'yuh mean?" Link demanded.

"Leave, to save your life. It's the only sensible thing you can do."

"Lissen," he stepped closer and through his low voice rang a steely purpose. "I never had much sense. I'm dumb an' lazy, that's why they call me Lazy Link. But I'm mulish. When I want to quit a thing or a job I quit. I don't want to quit here. I'll leave if yuh say so but I'll stay on the range. I got a pussonal fight with Devil Throp an' I'm fightin' till he's licked or till I'm licked."

Ellen rose to her feet and laid a hand on his arm. In his eyes burned a cold fury that brought a faint flush to her cheeks.

"I was thinking only of your safety," she answered.

He tapped the two guns at his hips lightly.

"I carry two life savers that are mighty dependable. Yuh go back to bed now an' don't think no more 'bout this. I'll stretch out on the porch an' we'll see what mornin' will bring."

CHAPTER IV

Brand of the Skunk

THE first gray streaks of dawn brought a blustering deputy from Throp City. Ellen was dressed and with Link she met him on the porch. The deputy accosted Link with sulphurous language.

"What the hell d'you mean?" he demanded. "Elmer Croy's killed here an' you pack him on a horse to his home with a cock an' bull story about killers follerin' him an' shootin' him

here. Yuh come with me, I want you for the murder o' Croy."

"Yeah, yuh don't say?" Link's voice was subtly sarcastic; he had not been unprepared for this procedure on the part of the deputy. "Yuh ain't got any other charges against me, have yuh?"

"That's enough, ain't it?" the deputy snapped. "But there's a little matter o' a threatenin' letter yuh sent Throp. There's the unwarranted attack on a man he sent here on an errand an' there's the hold up o' Sanders, the storekeeper, in Throp City. You act high an' mighty but you're dealin' with the law this time."

"Funny what a smell there is here." Link sniffed the air. "Regular skunk smell. It's a shame too 'cause it's right nice country, well—oh, this caught yuh unprepared, did it?"

While he was talking, Link's left hand suddenly snapped to his holster and before the surprised and officious deputy could make a move the muzzle was boring into his stomach. The feel of the gun turned his lean face a pasty yellow and involuntarily his hands rose shoulder high. Then he spluttered feebly.

"You—hey—you'll swing for this."

"I'd swing for murder anyhow, wouldn't I?" Link inquired blandly. "What's a crime more or less?" He reached out and plucked the officer's gun from its holster. "Now yuh ride back to Throp City, or to Devil Throp, I reckon it's all the same, an' get reenforcements. I got work to do here an' I can't be bothered by officers whose sole aim is to hinder the law. What yuh orta do is to find a barrel o' tar an' wash that skunk brand off yore hide."

Before the steely glare in Link's eyes, the bluster on the deputy's face faded. He stepped back, walked off the porch and to his horse. In the saddle again he delivered a parting threat.

"Throp was right when he said you was slick, but you ain't slick enough to fight this whole country. There'll be a hundred men on yore trail before sundown."

"Gosh, what a stink that'll raise," Link laughed. "It's bad enough with jes' yuh around."

The deputy put spurs to his horse and a moment later he disappeared from view back of the bunk house.

The girl turned a worried face to Link.

"He spoke the truth," she said anxiously. "You'll be hunted as a man was never hunted before; he'll get orders from Devil to get you or lose his job."

Link shrugged imperturbable shoulders.

"He'd be against us anyhow," he answered soberly. "Evidently he has had word from Throp since he knew about the note I sent by his errand boy. On the face of it it looks like Croy was killed here purposely to throw the murder off onto me, but I don't see how they could get Croy to fall in with that plan, unless they killed him somewhere else an' jes' dumped him here. That jes' reminds me. I could mebbe dope that out if I did a little trailin'. If Croy was shot here, his horse might be roamin' around somewhere out on the range. I guess I'll take a look; I won't be gone more'n an hour or so."

He got his horse from the corral and rode to the end of the yard. There he easily picked up the trail of several fast running horses and this he followed to a point a few hundred yards away where a single horse had turned off to the right. Three other horses had continued on straight ahead.

He followed this one horse and in a short while he noticed it had left off running and merely walked ahead. He wanted to find that horse. The thought had suddenly struck him that what had been sought on the person of Croy, and later in the ranch house, might be hidden in the saddle. The sun had crept up over the horizon, making the track easy to follow. In the tree tops birds chirped and a soft, warm peace hovered over the range.

FOR more than four miles Link followed that lone horse, some times losing the trail and again picking it up. But when he finally found the horse, others had beaten him to it. He was down in a little tree bordered swale when three riders appeared on the rim, leading a fourth horse. His sharp eyes measured them and even at that distance he could see that only one was a range man. The other two rode well enough but they did not have that swaying motion that made range riders appear as one with the horse. He reined in his horse and waited. Toward him were coming, he thought, the murderers of Elmer Croy.

The three riders saw him and turned their horses slightly, bearing directly down on him. They spread out just a little, coming on with a few feet of space between each horse. The center man, the one who was apparently range bred, led the other horse. He carried a six-gun, swung low. The other two wore automatic pistols in their belts similar to those worn by army officers. Slowly, deliberately, measuring him with their eyes, the three riders came on. There was not now any feeling of peace in the air.

A short distance in front of him the three riders stopped. The two outside ones were sizing him up furtively, the corners of their mouths drawn down. They squinted at each other momentarily and glued their eyes on him again, their lips twisted into thin, hard smiles. They looked supremely confident and arrogant. The third man, part breed, was appraising Link with ill concealed hostility. He began the conversation.

"You're that missin' link we've heard about?" he sneered openly.

"I reckon," Link answered.

"You got any business out here?"

"Mebbe."

"Were you possibly also lookin' for a horse?"

"Possibly."

"Yes, but we beat you to it, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Huh! Sparin' o' words, ain't you?" The calm of the other man had been ruffled by Link's drawling replies. "You know what's goin' to happen right now, hey?"

"Yeah."

Link had been watching, not only the speaker but the other two. On the faces of all he read the same intention. His death had been decided upon, at some sort of a signal they would all three go for their guns and when the smoke cleared he, the accused murderer of Elmer Croy, would be lying dead on the range. Secure in their numbers, they had intended to play with him, torture him with taunts, and now his calmness and his half-quizzical, half-jesting answers had gotten under their skin.

His last answer came to them as something of a shock. There was mockery, sarcasm, derision almost, in his voice. Exasperated at not seeing the fear they had expected, the two city gunmen cast a quick glance at their companion. This man looked hastily from one to the other of his companions, his breed blood boiling because of the calmness of Link.

AND then the scene changed with the swiftness of lightning, so fast that the eye could not follow the motion. Perhaps the exchange of looks was the signal and the three Devil Throp men went for their guns first. Perhaps it was the lanky waddy who first swooped his hands down in the swift rhythm of the perfect draw. At any rate, before any other guns were out, his two heavy sixes were lined on the three men while their guns still were in the leather. Then came his voice, biting as a January blizzard.

"Yuh birds drop them guns. If yuh drop 'em fast, yuh'll be alive a second from now."

The face of the breed burned hot from rage. The faces of the other two were twisted into hideous, hateful grimaces. But all were men trained in the use of guns, they knew that at

least two of them would die if they tried to disobey the cutting order. With separate "plumps" their guns dropped to the soft ground. Link smiled easily. He spoke to the breed.

"Yuh with the buzzard stripe, get a rope an' tie the hands an' feet o' yore two pals an' lay them under the trees yonder. Then I'll do the same thing for yuh. I want to ask yuh some questions about a certain murder last night but I ain't got time right now. It'll be kinda hot to lay here all day but that's yore hard luck."

The breed obeyed. His rage had given way to fear of that calm waddy whose lips were smiling but whose eyes were like glistening granite. He did not try to slight his job; glancing occasionally at Link, he tied knots as he had never tied them before. When he was through, Link trussed him up and laid him in the shade by his pals.

Then he began going through their pockets and from the person of the breed he brought forth a folded piece of paper. He unfolded it and read slowly the pencilled writing.

"ELMER CROY:

I have been doing Throp's dirty work for a long time, but I am sick and tired of the lousy skunks he has brought in from the city. I know that in the end they will plug me to beat me out of what I am supposed to collect.

Devil wanted me to burn down Ellen Shepperd's house last night and kidnap her. I drew the line at that. I don't burn down houses over the heads of women. Now my goose is cooked. I am a prisoner at the mine and it's a cinch I'll never get away alive. But Devil Throp won't gain by that if I can help it. He killed old man Shepperd. I swear to that. If you can, get this letter to Ellen Shepperd and that Link waddy.

SIMON TRASHER."

Link Kilgore stuffed the letter in his pocket. Then he threw the reins over the saddle horns of the four horses and sent them away over the range. Next he swung to his own saddle and started back toward the ranch. It was clear now how Elmer Croy had ridden to his death. He had been on the way to the Three Esses with the letter and in some way Devil Throp had got wind of the letter and sent out men to get it because of its damaging reference to the murder. Croy had likely secreted it in his saddle when he was first shot and with the coming of daylight the Throp riders had found the horse. In that way Croy had gone to his death in a desperate effort to help Ellen Shepperd. Link shook his head. He knew why Croy had been killed. But the letter left another puzzle and as big a one. How did Simon Trasher, a prisoner at the mine, get that letter to Croy? It was a mystery.

Link rode at a furious gallop back the way he had come. A disturbing thought flitted through his brain. Suppose Devil Throp had men watching the Three Esses? What if he should seize this opportunity to burn down the house and make the girl his prisoner. His face paled at the thought of the girl falling into Throp's hands.

He tore into a little strip of woods and even before he was quite through it he knew his worst fears were realized. He smelled smoke and a few feet farther on he could look down into the hollow where the buildings were. He swore chokingly. The ranch house was a seething mass of flames, black smoke and sparks flying high in the air.

Link Kilgore clenched his fist and shook it at the burning building. Then he swore brittlely. There was more to the burning house than just the kidnapping of Ellen Shepperd. It was a flaming warrant for his own death. Devil Throp knew that he, Link, could point to the incendiary. He knew too that if Link rode to the county seat and laid his knowledge before the authorities there, Throp's activities would be curbed. Therefore he would be ringed in by guns, partly under the command of the deputy sheriff, till there was no chance for him to break through.

Break through! Link laughed hol-

lowly. He was stopped in front of the burning house. He did not want to break through! He wanted to get Devil Throp. He wanted to do more. He wanted to pin the murder of old man Shepperd on him, he wanted to see him quaver before the bar of justice, wanted to be present when the judge pronounced his death sentence. That would make Devil Throp squirm. He thought him a coward at heart and living for a while in the certain knowledge the noose was waiting for him would be the only adequate punishment for Devil.

It was a stupendous task. To anyone but Link Kilgore it would be an impossible task. It was a job that would take all the cunning, all the keen fighting instinct he possessed. Traps would be set for him now. A step in the wrong direction would lead directly into the path of a bullet. And it would be dry-gulching. There would be no meeting him face to face. It would be a litter of skunks trying to trap a gray wolf. They would try to kill him as he might kill a poisonous rattler.

There was nothing he could do to save the burning house. And if there had been, there was no time. Ellen Shepperd was in a living hell with Devil Throp. Some way, any way, Throp had to be dealt with without delay, his fangs had to be pulled. And he alone in all that vast country had the guts to attack the mighty Devil!

CHAPTER V

TRAPPED

FOR just a moment Link Kilgore entertained the idea of riding to Elmer Croy's ranch and seeking the help of his waddies. But he gave up the idea. Croy had few men, possibly three, and they would have nothing to gain by joining active warfare against Devil Throp. Indeed, they would have everything to lose. It took a very optimistic person to believe that Throp could be beat.

Another thought crowded into the brain of Link as he more calmly thought over events. Simon Trasher's testimony would convict Devil of murder, without Trasher it might be impossible to convict him. The letter would be useless in court without witnesses to the signature. But Trasher was a prisoner at the mine, slated to die. Link pondered over this for a moment. In his scheme of revenge Trasher was needed.

For one thing, Trasher could give him the approximate number of men at Throp's ranch, the Lucky Seven, and the lay of the land. And if he could set Trasher free, he might manage to reach the county seat and get in touch with the sheriff. Too, by making an attempt to get Trasher he would more than likely cross the plans of Devil Throp. That there were men posted to get him he did not doubt but these men would likely be on the route to the Lucky Seven.

Link did not debate the question further. He would lose a little time riding by the mine but he would lose more than that if he was to attempt the direct route to the Lucky Seven and stop lead on the way. And he did not anticipate an ambush on the way to the mine, it would be too far off the way he'd be supposed to go.

He put spurs to his horse and with a magnificent burst of speed the big sorrel carried him away from the burning house in a direction opposite to that from the Lucky Seven. Striking the strip of woods he had passed through before, he traversed it again and then swung north. A mile farther on the country began taking on a rough contour and he was able to keep out of the open much of the time by taking a course through washes and gullies. He had seen nobody following him, an almost hopeless task considering the speed of his horse.

In a deep gully he dismounted and left his horse. He did not know just how far he was from the mine but he knew it could not be far. And he could not ride in openly, he had to sneak in. There would likely be men there

guarding Simon Trasher. The circumstances demanded caution.

He was closer to the mine than he had supposed. Climbing from the gully he covered a little more than a hundred yards before he found himself in a long and very narrow cut with rock walls rising steeply more than fifty feet above his head. On one side an overhang bulged out at the top so it almost closed the narrow gap. Quickly he passed through to suddenly stop stock still.

He was at the mine. It was an almost circular space, a good hundred feet in diameter. Sheer walls of hills hemmed it in all around, leaving the passage by which he had entered the only means of ingress or egress. Against a hillside was built a rough board shack and a short distance from it was the mine shaft.

Near the shaft stood four men. One was Simon Trasher. His hands were tied back of him and his face was pale as a sheet. Of the other men, one stood out conspicuously. He wore khaki breeches, shoes and leather puttees. On his head was a cork helmet and at his side swung an automatic pistol. The other two were evidently riffraff like the two men he had left tied out on the range with the half breed.

It was plain what was about to happen. Trasher had run his string. He was up for execution and on the faces of the two city gangsters were looks of keen anticipation. Link Kilgore was not squeamish, he had seen death often enough, been responsible for it himself, but a feeling of revulsion flashed through him at sight of these two smiling killers. If Simon Trasher had never performed a redeeming deed in his life, he could not stand by and see him killed in cold blood. The man with the cork helmet faced about and started to walk away from Trasher. This brought him face to face with Link and with a bound the waddy leaped forward, out of the shadows cast by the cliff.

A gasp of surprise came from the cork-helmeted individual. Back of him the other two men turned and saw Link. Rasping oaths fell from their lips. Then their hands darted to the guns at their waists. Simon Trasher grunted hoarsely and threw himself flat on the ground.

Shots rattled out within the little walled-in bowl. Steel-jacked bullets from automatics tore past Link and bored into the rock walls. His two guns flipped out and at the height of his waist they flamed. One shot from each gun was all he fired and two of the automatics were silenced. Only the man with the cork helmet was still pressing the trigger and his hand was shaking so his bullets came nowhere near Link. His eyes blazing their cold fury, the waddy walked steadily toward this man, his two gun muzzles trained on the ground.

The man fired his last shell. With a sobbing scream he hurled his gun at Link's head and with a low laugh the waddy flung up a hand and caught it, letting it slip into his pocket. The man turned to run and Link's voice rang out.

"Stop!"

The ringing voice penetrated the fear-muddled brain of the running man. He stopped, turned to face Link, his hands upraised. The muscles in his pasty face worked spasmodically and his body shook like a leaf. Trasher rose to his knees, his eyes on the stern-faced waddy.

Link stopped in front of the quavering man, one of his guns prodding him in the ribs. He looked past him at Trasher.

"WE MEET again, Trasher," he said.

"I swear, Kilgore, I was tryin' to help yuh," Trasher yammered. "Yuh could have killed me yesterday an' yuh didn't, that made an impression on me an' I—"

"Where's Ellen Shepperd?" Link broke in.

"Devil Throp got her at the Lucky Seven. I swear, Link, I tried to warn yuh. I wrote a letter—"

"I got it. How did yuh send it?"

He watched Simon Trasher closely. The letter had been a puzzle. If Trasher could explain how Elmer Croy received it, he'd believe Trasher had really tried to help, even though his motive had mainly been hope that help might come to himself through the letter.

"It was a dog," Trasher explained quickly. "I had bought it from Elmer Croy an' every time it got loose it made a bee line for his ranch. I brought the dog along when they took me here an' I tied the letter 'round his neck an' set him loose, hopin' he'd go to Croy. The guards here saw him runnin' an' shot at him an' I didn't know whether he made it or not."

Link Kilgore nodded. It was a plausible explanation, about the only logical one. But he did not think so much about that. His mind was on Trasher. At that moment he realized he could get little if any help from the Lucky Seven foreman. Trasher was craven with fear, with no thought save for his own skin. If he were to let him ride for the sheriff in all likelihood he would make a bee line out of the country. He smiled bitterly. He had wasted time saving a man who had no thought for anyone but himself, who would turn against him in a minute if he saw gain for himself in the act. He motioned with his head toward the cork-helmeted man.

"Who's this skunk?" he asked.

"The engineer, Sully Grimes. They were goin' to kill me, shoot me in cold blood. Put a bullet into him, Link, he's a rat. Then get yore horse an' we'll ride. I can get yuh out o' this country without Devil Throp or his men seein' yuh. I owe yuh—"

"Wait a minnit, Trasher. Ellen Shepperd is at Devil's house yuh say—"

"Yuh can't do nothin' for her," Trasher broke in quickly. "She don't know it yet, but the higher court has thrown out Devil's injunction. There are big city crooks back o' Throp, this engineer an' some o' the other gangster scum are their men, here to watch Devil an' keep tab on him. With the injunction thrown out their string is run unless they use force. That's what Devil is goin' to do. He's got a justice o' the peace at the ranch an' he'll force Ellen to marry him. When he gets tired o' her some accident will happen to her an' Devil will have the mine an' the Three Esses. Nobody can help her, we better—"

"Shut up, damn yuh!" For once Lazy Link Kilgore's placidity forsook him. His voice was brittle and a slight flush mounted his cheeks. He shoved his guns back in their holsters and with a pocket knife he cut the ropes about Trasher's wrists.

"We're gonna get that girl, Trasher," he glowered at the pale-faced foreman. "If there's a chance o' yuh bein' o' some use, yuh're gonna help. The Devil's crew is dwindlin' down. Six are accounted for now an' I'll get more. Yuh get yoreself pulled together a little an' me an' yuh are goin' to devise ways an' means to get Ellen Shepperd out o' Devil Throp's claws. Either that or we're gonna die, Trasher."

With balled up fists he stared straight ahead. At that moment he wished he had stayed in Throp City the day before and had a showdown with Devil. If he had met him there in a fight he felt sure he could have killed him and then the girl would not be in his clutches now, she would have the mine and the ranch and could go ahead and work both.

HIS thoughts were interrupted by the sound of hoofs. Trasher too had heard and he whirled about to look toward the pass. The sound grew louder and Link realized a large body of horsemen were headed for the mine.

The thought of his position flashed through his mind. The riders, whoever they were, would be enemies. They could close up the pass and he would be trapped with Trasher and Sully Grimes like rats in a trap. He

had to get out or he would never be able to help Ellen Shepperd. Without a look or a word to the two men, he started running toward the narrow pass.

At the very mouth he stopped. He was too late. Already horsemen were at the other end and it was impossible for him to go through. There was fully two dozen men in the mounted cavalcade and in front rank rode the deputy sheriff.

A mirthless smile played about the lips of Link. The deputy had recruited his posse quickly and in all likelihood some of Devil Throp's men had been close enough to see he was setting a course for the mine and put the deputy on his trail. To them he was a murderer and whether he was or not, they would have orders from Devil to get him. He whipped out his guns.

"Back with yuh all!" he shouted, stepping out in full view, his guns levelled at them.

Oaths of surprise and chagrin greeted him. A man swung up a gun and promptly Link sent a bullet through his arm. The horses milled, men in the front rank shouted and cursed, yelling for the men in the rear to give way. In wild confusion the troop turned and tore out of the pass. A couple of shots rang out but Link was unhurt. The posse disappeared from sight.

Link breathed heavily. He was safe but he was trapped. There did not now appear to be any chance of helping Ellen Shepperd. He could hold the posse at bay but there might be places where they could ascend the hills and from the rim above pour lead into the little bowl. He had made a costly mistake in coming to the mine.

CHAPTER VI

A Student of Engineering

THE ordinary man would have been concerned with thoughts of his own safety under circumstances such as confronted Link Kilgore. He did not think of his own skin except in so far as his own well-being concerned the chances of helping Ellen Shepperd. The thought of her plight spurred him on to immediate thoughts of escape, refusing to acknowledge the situation impossible. He turned and motioned Sully Grimes and Trasher over. Trasher was again showing signs of panic while the engineer's face had taken on a look of smug satisfaction.

"Yuh know o' any way out o' this place, Trasher?" Link demanded.

Trasher licked his dry lips. He shook his head.

"There ain't no way out," he mumbled thickly. "We're as good as dead."

"Hell!" Link snorted disgustedly. "Yuh, Sully Grimes, yuh're an engineer, what's the chances o' gettin' out o' here? Don't fail to think close now, 'cause yore life ain't worth a hell o' a lot unless we get out. Yore pals out there might get me an' Trasher but they won't save yuh, savvy?"

The smugness disappeared from the face of the engineer. The tone of voice employed by Link froze the blood in his veins.

"I—I—I don't believe—"

"Think again. Yuh find a way out o' this place an' yuh got a chance for yore life. Fail an' yuh die here with Trasher an' me."

The eyes of Sully Grimes became large, his face ashy gray. There was something sinister in the voice and mien of the lanky waddy that filled his cringing soul with unspeakable fear. What was promised him was in line with what he'd do himself under like circumstances and it never occurred to him that the code of the waddy was different from his own. And there was the matter of his two dead comrades, lying a few feet away. Where he had seen freedom before he now saw certain death.

That fear became a spur that set his technical mind to working at top speed. His eyes swept to the crude cabin and up the walls that hemmed in the bowl. Near the pass, the wall

rose steeply as the others but thirty feet up it began to slope toward the top, enough so a man could crawl up if he managed to scale the first thirty feet. He gestured with his hands.

"Let me take Trasher," he spoke with feverish haste. "We'll rip boards from the cabin an' nail a scaling ladder together that will take us to the slope above. Then we can creep over the top and elude the men below. Trust me, I'll fix it."

Link looked up. He saw the feasibility of the plan and nodded.

"Snap into it," he ordered curtly.

Sully Grimes and Trasher ran toward the cabin, their enmity forgotten in the common fear that gripped them.

From beyond the pass came the voice of the deputy sheriff.

"You, Link Kilgore, we got you, you might as well come out an' surrender. If you come out I'll guarantee you a fair trial. If you don't, I can't guarantee your life."

Link's answer came immediately.

"Gimme thirty minnits to think it over."

"All right, but no more. If you—"

The rest of the deputy's words were lost. From back of Link came an excited yelp from Simon Trasher, a high, fearful shout of warning. Link spun around, saw Trasher hurl himself at Sully Grimes and saw Sully fling an object toward Link. Trasher deflected his aim and instead of coming straight for Link, the object, not unlike a short stick, was hurtling straight for the cliff side a few feet to his left.

A premonition more than actual reasoning actuated the course of the waddy. So quickly and unexpectedly had this occurred that there was no time to think. He leaped away from the cliff, ran a few feet and hurled himself flat to the ground. The earth quivered under him as a terrific explosion shook the hills. A shower of rock splinters were hurled high and wide and far up in the side of the cliff, near the slanting part of the top, a fissure appeared in the rock.

Link Kilgore rose to his feet. His steel nerves were unshaken despite the fact he had just missed death by the narrowest of margins. There was something odd and grimly humorous in the manner his life had been saved as Trasher, the day before an ally of the engineers, and even now an enemy of Link's, had interceded in his behalf because of two evils he was the lesser. His quick jump at Grimes had deflected the stick of dynamite.

Now he was fighting furiously in hand-to-hand struggle with the engineer. Near them was a pine box with red printing on the side. In it could be seen the brownish sticks of the explosive and Sully Grimes was trying to get to this box for another of the deadly sticks. Link shouted warningly.

"Off, Grimes! I'll drill yuh!"

The cold, menacing voice recalled the engineer. He stepped back, his eyes snapping hatefully at Trasher. The Lucky Seven foreman waved his arms excitedly.

"There's a thirty-foot ladder in the shaft," he called. "I wanted to get it an' Sully stepped into the shack. When he came out he had this box o' dynamite. I saved—"

"I know, Trasher. Get the ladder, yuh two, I'll watch yuh this time."

With feverish haste Trasher ran to the mine shaft, half dragging the engineer with him. The ladder was hauled up and together they started toward the cliff side.

The next moment the eyes of Link were forced from them. A noise in the pass caught his ears and he whirled about. As he did a shot rang out and a bullet whined its way past his head. His guns snapped up like twin streaks and fired simultaneously. In the pass two crawling men quivered convulsively and dropped down to the earth. Back at the other end shadowy forms leaped hurriedly out of sight.

"Devil's spawn!" Link gritted. "If that girl's hurt I'll send every last one o' yuh to hell!"

HE HEARD the ladder scrape against the hillside and when he looked he saw it in place and Sully Grimes scrambling up, his head twisted to watch Link. The waddy's lips curled in a scornful smile.

"Not so fast, yuh, Sudden Sully. Down with yuh again. Yuh, an' yuh too, Trasher, fill yore pockets with that dynamite. Snap alive now."

The engineer stopped, swore under his breath and descended hastily. Simon Trasher laughed.

"Right," he grinned. "From the top we can fling dynamite down among the men outside an' blow 'em all to hell. Yuh got brains, Link."

Link did not answer. Standing where he was he watched the two men as they hurried to the pine box. This time he did not give the engineer a chance to play further tricks, he kept his gun trained on him while he filled his pockets with sticks of dynamite. When Trasher also had his pockets filled, they marched back to the ladder, the foreman walking back of Grimes.

There Link again crossed the engineer. He started hurriedly up the ladder but was called back.

"Yuh first, Trasher," Link smiled grimly. "Then yuh, Sudden Sully, an' I'll bring up the rear."

They clambered up and despite the danger on the slope above, Link made the two men haul up the ladder and push it to the top of the cliff. There they laid it down and Link motioned them to stand aside. They could not be seen by the posse below because of the peculiar, overhanging cliff. The engineer edged away a few steps and tried to peer over the side.

"Don't trust him," Trasher motioned with his hands toward Grimes. "Let me throw the dynamite, I'll guarantee to get 'em all."

Link smiled, a teasing, inscrutable smile.

"Sorry, Trasher," he rejoined, "I ain't a murderer. I don't mind pluggin' them in a fair fight but I can't stomach that kind o' fightin'."

Trasher's face fell and the engineer spun around in surprise. Link's smile became more pronounced.

"Right now I'm a student o' engineerin'," he drawled. "I'll leave it up to yuh, Sudden Sully, whether I am an apt pupil or not. Keep yore faces shut now, both o' yuh, till I tell yuh to open 'em."

He inclined his head toward the open bowl below. Cupping his hands over his lips, he raised his voice in a shout.

"All right, sheriff, I give up. Yuh got me."

For a moment there was complete silence. Trasher and Sully Grimes stared at Link as if they doubted their ears. Then came a low hail from below.

"All right, come on out."

Link replaced his hands over his lips. He shouted again.

"Cain't. Sully Grimes flung a stick o' dynamite. One o' my legs is busted."

He waited anxiously for the answer. When it came he smiled.

"Let Grimes speak a few words. If he says it's O. K. we're comin' in."

Link's gun flipped out. The muzzle bored into the ribs of Grimes.

"Speak yore piece," Link ordered softly. "Yuh know what to say."

He felt the engineer quiver under the feel of the gun. For a moment he was silent, trying to find a way out. A slight pressure of the gun muzzle decided him. He placed his hands over his lips.

"All right, sheriff, he's crippled."

"Wha—wha—w h a t the hell?" Trasher gaped open-mouthed at Link.

The tramp of many hoofs sounded below. Listening keenly, Link decided the entire posse was moving in. He turned to Trasher and Grimes, pointing with his finger.

"Pile yore dynamite in the little hollow yonder. Quick now an' then get far back."

Swiftly they obeyed, Trasher with a dubious look, the engineer trembling, his face distorted. Laying the sticks in a pile, the two men hurried back. Link remained where he was, squinting down into the bowl.

The first of the posse became visible. Others followed and in a moment the bowl was well filled with mounted men. Link turned and ran back a piece.

Some fifty feet away he stopped. Still farther back of him was Trasher and the engineer. He halted them with a wave of his hand. His right hand, gripping a gun, swung up and Grimes threw himself flat on the ground. Trasher followed his example, an inkling of what was about to happen flashing through his brain.

The gun in the hand of Link roared twice, so close together the shots almost sounded as one. At the same time the lanky cow waddy flung himself flat on the ground, hugging it closely.

A thunderous report crashed out. A geyser of dust, rock and smoke rose in the air. Underneath the three flattened men the hilltop trembled and thousands of pieces of small and large rock slabs hurtled through the air. A dull roar followed the explosion, a new cloud of dust welled up and again the hilltop shook. Then came scattered small reports as the larger rocks dropped back to earth. A moment later complete silence reigned.

Link rose to his feet. Back of him the engineer and Trasher also scrambled to upright postures. All three were staring at the place where the overhang had covered the pass. It was gone now. A long, jagged gash was there and in the pass lay thousands of tons of rock. The trail was blocked. Sully Grimes had opened a rift in the cliff side with the stick of dynamite he threw. Link had completed the job, bottling up the posse in the bowl below. The student had become a full-fledged engineer.

CHAPTER VII

The Devil's Hour

BEHIND Link, Simon Trasher mumbled a low, almost reverent-sounding curse.

"Man, yuh got 'em bottled up," he breathed.

He was craning forward, looking down into the bowl where a wild scramble met his eyes. Men and horses had been wounded by the flying hail of rock slivers and the terrified horses were milling about while men shouted and cursed trying to bring them under control. It was a wild and at the same time majestic spectacle.

"Turn about is fair play," Link Kilgore laughed easily.

He fixed his eyes on Sully Grimes. The engineer was regarding him balefully, his fists doubled up, his eyes glaring. He said nothing.

Link was confronted by a problem. He had to ride, make the Devil's ranch without any loss of time. But he could not leave the posse down in the bowl unguarded. They would be able to crawl over the debris in the pass and while they could not get their horses out, he could not afford to have any of them at large until his job was finished. He shot a question at Trasher.

"How many men has Devil at the ranch, not figgerin' the engineer here, the two dead ones down below an' three others I've taken care of?"

"That would leave four besides Throp."

"Four an' Devil, not so bad. Trasher, if I had an enemy an' I swore to get him, even if he should give me the slip, what do yuh think would happen?"

Simon Trasher shuddered a little. He lifted his eyes to Link's face. For nearly a minute he studied him, the eyes, every line in his face. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Yuh'd get him in the end," he answered.

"I would," Link nodded emphati-

cally. "Trasher, yuh're in the position o' the man I'm huntin'. I'm goin' to get Devil Throp an' I'm goin' to set Ellen Shepperd free. I'm gonna take Sudden Sully with me an' leave yuh here with a gun to keep that mob down below where they are. There'll be a temptation for yuh. While there won't be any horse for yuh, yuh'll have a chance to sneak down an' make a getaway.

"All right, I'll chance that because I have to. But—if yuh leave yore post here, I swear I'll hunt yuh down like a dog. I got the letter yuh wrote, there's enough in that letter to set every sheriff in the state on yore trail. Yuh can get away for a little while but yuh'll be caught. What d'yuh think about it?"

Simon Trasher drew a long, deep breath. When he answered, sincerity rang through his voice.

"Link Kilgore, Grimes was goin' to kill me a while ago when yuh rode in. He was goin' to kill me 'cause I broke with Devil. I'm no angel, but there's some dirt I don't stoop to. Yesterday I'd never believe yuh could even scratch Devil Throp, now I'll be surprised if yuh don't get him. My testimony will hang him but he can't hurt me. I'd be a fool to make yuh my enemy under the circumstances. I'll stay here. I'll guarantee to keep that crew in the bowl till yuh come back. Yuh can depend on that."

"All right, Trasher, I'll depend on that. To make doubly sure I'll ride by Croy ranch an' have a couple o' men kinda keep a lookout thisaway. Here."

He fished the engineer's automatic from his pocket and handed it to Trasher, motioning for Grimes to hand over the belt. Thus armed, Trasher laid down on the ground in such a position that he could command the top of the debris pile in the pass. He did not look at Link again.

For just a moment Link watched him. It was a situation he did not like, a former pal against the men he had worked with. But it could not be helped, it was a chance he had to take. He turned to the engineer.

"Come on, Sudden Sully," he snapped.

They scrambled down the fairly steep hillside. Below they found two horses and Link brought one of them for Grimes. He cut the cinches on the other saddle so Trasher could not use it in case he should try for a break. In the gully he found his own horse and they headed for the Lucky Seven, Grimes riding close beside Link.

The waddy was not thinking about the engineer as they rode along. Neither did he ride toward the Croy ranch. The threat he had made to Trasher was more to impress him than anything else. His mind was wholly occupied by thoughts of Ellen Shepperd. Would he be in time to save her? Where would he find her and how would he go about getting her away?

THESE questions occupied his mind until they came within sight of the Lucky Seven buildings, sprawled on a wide flat, well-removed from any woods. Link pulled his horse to a stop, motioning Grimes to stop also. Then an odd grin spread over his face.

"Look at me, Sudden Sully," he snapped. "Watch close now."

The engineer stared at him. His mind had been busy also with plans for thwarting that grim, hard-riding waddy. Now he stared with deep concern, half-fearful that his end might have come. He saw a sudden blur as Link moved his hands, then his face fell, his eyes opened wide again and a little yelp escaped him.

Link had whipped out his two guns. He had done it so unbelievably fast that Sully Grimes had been unable to follow the movement. His face paled. His tongue licked over dry lips.

"Don't shoot," he yammered. "I'll—"

"Hey, Sudden Sully." Link laughed, almost hilariously. "I've got it figgered out. Yuh an' me are gonna put the kibosh on Devil, he was unlucky

when he got hold o' yuh an' Trasher. Lissen close now, yuh saw my guns but yuh didn't see how I got them out. I hope I won't have occasion to use them on yuh but if that occasion does come, yuh know about what chance yuh'll have to dodge some lead—"

"There won't be any occasion," Sully broke in fervently.

"That's up to yuh, Sully. I'm gonna take my rope, cut it an' use one piece for a lead rope on my horse an' the other piece to tie my own hands. Yeah, don't get so hilarious lookin', Sully, there'll be a joker in this.

"It'll look like I'm tied up good an' fast. But I won't be, I'll be able to slip my hands out o' the ropes in a jiffy an' I'll have both my guns stuck inside the waistband o' my pants in the back. That'll give me empty holsters an' make the job look real. That's why I showed yuh how long it takes to get my guns out, so yuh wouldn't feel like takin' any chances. The first false move yuh make, wham! Like that yuh get it.

"Bein' a smart engineer an' in love with life, yuh won't make any false moves. Yuh'll take the lead rope an' yuh'll lead me into the Lucky Seven ranch yard with a grin on yore face a yard long. Then yuh'll be awful careful as we dismount an' yuh drag me into whatever room Devil might be in, then I'll take charge again. Now, Sudden Sully, yuh realize how much is at stake for yuh in this little play?"

The engineer nodded. The faint smile that had appeared about his lips when Link explained about being tied had vanished and been replaced by his former look of fear. He watched closely as Link fixed the lead rope and then to all appearances tied his hands back of him with the rope wound about his waist. Then he mounted his horse again, and unless one looked very close, it was impossible to tell that Link was not a genuine prisoner.

They started ahead, Grimes leading Link's horse. A few minutes later the voice of the waddy sounded again.

"There's two waddies comin' toward us," he said. "Play yore part careful, Sully, look happy in case they talk to us. If they get suspicious, yuh'll never know how the fight ended."

The two riders came straight toward them. When they were close enough to recognize Grimes, they let out a yell.

"Hey Sully, how the hell did yuh get him?" They looked from Link to the engineer.

Sully did not answer immediately, not being sure what Link would expect him to say. The waddy settled that for him by breaking into a string of spiteful curses.

"The dam' deputy an' his men," he snarled. "Fifty men—"

The waddies broke in with peals of laughter. Then they sobered and looked at the engineer.

"There's hell to pay," one said. "Last night one o' Croy's waddies sent a telegram to the sheriff. He's liable to be out any minute. We got to see the deputy sheriff an' put him wise. Where is he?"

"In hell, I hope," Link broke in vindictively. "He rode to the Three Esses."

The men looked inquiringly at the engineer and he nodded without saying anything.

"Then we'll see him there. We got to look for Jose, Squint an' Duckfoot too, they haven't come in yet, we got to wise them up the sheriff is comin'. Yuh ride in, Sully, Throp will shore be glad to see what yuh got."

They rode on and Link looked after them till they were out of gun range. Evidently they had not become suspicious as they rode on at a rapid gait. He chuckled softly.

"Yuh're learnin', Sudden," he said. "Now lead on, an' don't mope."

They started toward the Lucky Seven again.

CONTRARY to the expectations of Link, they gained the ranch house yard without being seen by anyone. It was about midday and from

the house came the faint odors of cooking. They swung down from their horses and Link nudged the engineer with his elbow.

"Smile, damn yuh," he admonished harshly.

Sully Grimes twisted his face into a distorted grin. Then he stepped on the porch, followed by Link, pulled open a door and they both entered.

Just inside they stopped, Link's eyes flashed over the room, taking every occupant in the single glance. There were four men present with Ellen Shepperd. The girl was standing close to Devil Throp, her face almost white, a great fear shining in her eyes. Devil held her by the left arm.

In front of them stood Sanders, the store-keeper, with what appeared to be an open Bible in his hand. Back of him and a little to one side stood two of Throp's men. Sanders was talking.

"Do you take this man to be your lawful husband—"

"No!" Link Kilgore's voice boomed explosively through the room. "Yuh, Devil, let go o' her."

A momentary silence fell over the room. Justice of the peace Sanders dropped the Bible. Devil Throp let his hand slip from the girl's arm and the two waddies tensed. The ticking of a clock was the only sound heard. Then came the snarling voice of Devil Throp.

"Go ahead, Sanders, he's tied up an' we got to be married before the dam' sheriff gets here or everything is lost."

"It's lost now, Devil." Link slipped his arms from the ropes, his guns raising to cover the little group. "Sully, get a rope an' tie 'em up. Ellen, don't cave in now, we got 'em licked."

The girl swayed unsteadily on her feet. For a moment it looked like she would fall. Then blood surged into her face, a light leaped into her eyes and with a glad cry she took a step toward Link.

In so doing she came between him and the group of men. With a howl of rage Devil Throp dropped his hand and the next split-second his gun roared. Sanders flung himself to the floor but the two waddies followed the lead of their boss, snapping their guns into action.

Link's left arm shot out. With a sweep he sent the girl falling to the floor, then he leaped aside, his guns growled out answering shots and in a moment the room was full of swirling smoke eddies that partly hid the fighting men.

Devil Throp's first shot had found a target in the left side of Link. The bullet from his left hand gun went wide because of the wound, but his other gun accounted for one of the waddies. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sully Grimes stretch out his hands to grasp him and his gun swung backward. The barrel thudded on Sully's head and he dropped to the floor. Link leaped aside and fired again.

Spitefully the guns roared. The frightened face of the cook appeared momentarily at a door, then the door slammed shut. Another bullet nicked Link and his quick return shot brought down the second of the two waddies. Only Devil Throp was standing, his face distorted and hideous from rage and hate.

Link shifted about. At the same time two hands gripped him about the ankles. Sanders had wormed close and his sudden grip threw the waddy off balance. He tried vainly to steady himself and escape from the fatal hold. He found it impossible, plunged forward and lashed out furiously with his right hand gun.

In defeat his lightning-quick thinking saved his life. Devil Throp had seen the action of Sanders. With an inhuman grin he took a step forward, bringing his gun to bear full on the heart of Link. The waddy saw the move and the slight loss of time as Throp aimed. As he fell, he timed his own swing and before Devil Throp could press trigger Link's gun rapped

him on the side of the head. Firing wildly, Throp staggered back and fell to the floor. Link squirmed on the floor, kicked his legs free and leaped up.

In the ranch house yard an automobile roared. A quick step sounded on the porch and through the door pushed a middle-aged, slightly stoop-shouldered man with a star pinned on his chest. He had a six-gun in each hand.

"What's goin' on here?" he rasped.

Quick as a flash Link turned to Sanders. His finger almost stabbed the storekeeper, justice of the peace in the face.

"The jig's up, Sanders," he snapped. "I got Trasher's signed confession in my pocket, about the minin' scheme an' the murder o' Croy. Better come clean unless yuh want to swing."

Sanders waved his hand excitedly.

"I had nothin' to do with it," he yelled. "It was Throp ordered the killin' an' Jose, Squint an' Duckfoot killed Croy. They wanted the letter Trasher sent by the dog."

"That's a fact, sheriff," Link nodded to the officer. "Yuh got here jes' in time to clean up a bad mess. The three killers are tied up out on the range an' yore deputy sheriff with a crooked posse are prisoners at the mine."

Link turned to the girl. Ellen had risen from the floor and was regarding him with a light in her eyes even he understood. He stepped closer and took her hand.

"Yore troubles are over now, Ellen," he said softly. "Now yuh can live in peace."

"And you?" she asked.

"I—I?" he stammered. "I'd like to help yuh—always."

"I want you to," she said simply, stepping inside his arms.

On the floor Devil Throp groaned faintly but they did not hear him.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912.

Of Western Trails Magazine published monthly at Springfield, Mass., for October 1st, 1931.

State of New York ss.

County of New York

Before me, a Notary in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the Western Trails Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Magazine Publishers, Inc., 67 West 44th St., N. Y. C.; Editor, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th St., N. Y. C.; Managing Editor, None. Business Managers, None.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Magazine Publishers, Inc., 67 West 44th St., N. Y. C.; Samuel H. Hunter, 305 E. 46th St., N. Y. C.; Elinor Post Hersey, 20 Bank St., N. Y. C.; Paul H. Sampliner, 305 E. 46th St., N. Y. C.; Warren A. Angel, 45 W. 45th St., N. Y. C.; Herman Rawitzer, 305 E. 46th St., N. Y. C.; John F. Edwards, 305 E. 46th St., N. Y. C.; Frank Armer, 305 E. 46th St., N. Y. C.; Robert J. Boyle, 71 W. 45th St., N. Y. C.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

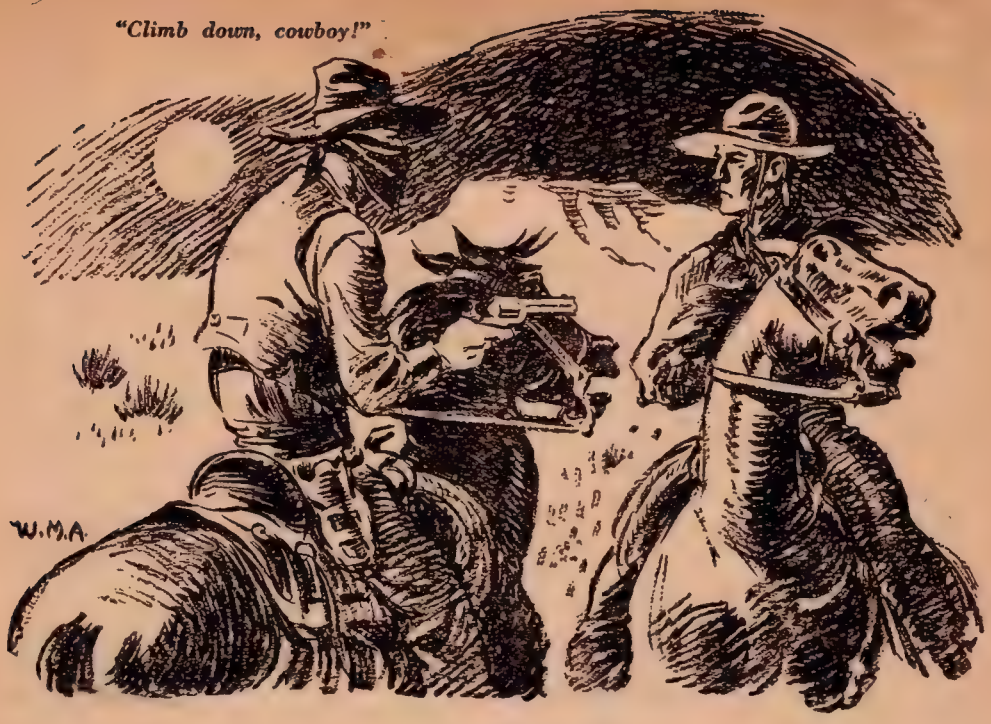
5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the six months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

A. A. WYN

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 8th day of September, 1931.

LAWRENCE F. DUNN,

Commission Expires March 30, 1932.
Notary Public, Kings County,
Kings Co. Clk's No. 284, Reg. No. 2380
Cert. filed in N. Y. Co. Clk's No. 800,
Reg. No. 2-D-512.



"Climb down, cowboy!"

Cactus Courage

By FORBES PARKHILL

Author of "Partners of Peril," etc.

Jaddo Braggs had some dream. It gave him a lump on his head—and a devil of a time explaining it!

"I WOULDN'T marry Skip Carberry if he was the last man on earth!" flared Katie, the freckled hasher, as she slapped the bill-of-fare on the lunch counter of The Prairie Queen cafe.

Jaddo Baggs, bandy-legged cowhand, meditated a moment and then solemnly announced: "N e i t h e r would I, ma'am."

"He ain't a n y gentleman!" snapped Katie.

"He's a louse," said the cowhand.

"Well, I wouldn't put it that way." She sighed. "Men are all alike."

"Yuh mean," scowled Jaddo, "that I'm a louse?"

Kate stood back and regarded him appraisingly. "We-ell, now, I don't know. Maybe not, Jaddo."

"He better not start anything with me, Katie. If he does, I'll make him look like a horned toad with the bell—with the stomachache. Can't nobody make a monkey out'n me!"

She looked him over carefully. "I guess that's right, Jaddo. Nobody could make a monkey out of you."

Jaddo beamed. "I'll make him look like he'd accidentally left his

face in front of a stampede! I'll—"

"If you're wise, you won't tangle with Skip, cowboy. He's liable to tie you in a bow knot."

"Is that so?" bristled Jaddo. "Say, Katie, I got brains, and I got gu—I mean, nerve. I reckon yuh never heard about that time over in Laramie, did yuh, when I—"

"—When you got jugged for making faces at the sheriff with your ears? Yes, I heard about that time, Jaddo."

"Don't yuh go for to believe any such lies about me, Katie. 'Specially when that jughead, Skip, tells 'em. Besides, y'understand, it wasn't my ears."

"Oh, yeah. I remember. You made faces at him with your fingers, didn't you?"

"That ain't the point, at all. The point is, there ain't a jail built that's strong enough to hold me when I'm mad—and I been in the best of 'em. Y'understand, I got both brains and nerve. I unjailed myself so daggoned quick that—"

"The way *I* heard it, Jaddo, t'other prisoners threatened to up and strike, if the sheriff didn't throw you out. Said they'd bust his jail to flinders and leave him flat, sooner than suffocate."

"It's a lie! A dirty lie, Katie. They wouldn't really of suffocated. I'll tell yuh why. They's a feller, he was telling me that if yuh snuck up on 'em quiet enough, they's a certain striped animal that yuh can grab by the tail 'fore—"

"Jaddo, you're like me—too trusting. What'll you have to eat?"

"No, I ain't too trusting. Maybe it all happened account I didn't sneak up quiet enough. Some day I'm going to—"

"What you going to eat, cowboy?"

Jaddo scanned the bill-of-fare doubtfully. "I ain't very hungry, Katie. Thinking of how Skip done you sort of sapped my appetite. Let's see—reckon I'll take a bowl of soup, and a sirloin steak, and a mess of that corn silage, and smashed potatoes, and a hunk of mince pie, and coffee."

KATIE peered at him anxiously. "Ain't you afraid you'll waste away, Jaddo? A body has to eat something, you know, to keep its strength."

It was growing dark outside when Jaddo finally untwined his legs, rose to his feet, hitched up his chaps, took up his check and started for the door.

"Just let it ride, Katie," he remarked casually as he tossed the check on the cigar counter alongside the cash register and reached for the toothpicks. "I'll pay yuh when—"

"You'll pay me right now, Jaddo Baggs! Didn't I tell you I'd quit trusting men? It's one dollar and fifteen cents."

"Well, if *that's* the way yuh feel about it," sighed Jaddo with an air of injured pride as he fished in his pocket. "But y'understand, see, I thought *I* was good for a measly—And after all I done for you, Katie!"

"What did you ever do for me?"

"Didn't I promise yuh I'd whale the pie out of Skip Carberry? Didn't I? He can't treat you thataway and get away with it, Katie—not, understand, whilst yo're a friend of mine!"

"You better not mess around with Skip, Jaddo. There isn't any hospital in Queen City. And I said a dollar fifteen—not a dollar."

"Oh, *all* right! Just the same Skip better keep outa my sight, if he craves to keep his health. Brains and nerve is a tough combination—and I got 'em both. If I lay eyes on him, he better tuck his tail and hiper for home!"

HE WAS muttering to himself as he pushed through the door and emerged upon the board sidewalk. He had taken but a dozen steps when he found his path blocked by a broad-shouldered and handsome man, rigged out in range fashion. Jaddo's lips parted in a forced smile as he stammered.

"Why, uh—howdy, old hand! How—how's tricks, Skip?"

Skip, standing with feet wide apart and arms akimbo, scowled forbiddingly.

"I thought I told yuh to keep away from that rest'rant, yuh louse! I got a good mind to bust yuh one."

"Yuh—yuh wouldn't go for to hit a woman with a child in her arms, would yuh, Skip?"

"Say, are you crazy, or some thing? Yuh may be a old woman, but yuh don't usually pack anything in yore arms but a armload of applesauce.

"Ha-ha! Yuh—yuh don't exactly get the point, Skip. Y'understand, see, a feller that wouldn't hit a lady wouldn't hit a drunk, would he? And I'm drunk. Awful drunk, Skip. Shee, I—I can't even talk straight!"

"Drunk? Yuh ain't drunk. Yo're only crazy."

"I ain't? I betcha I am, Skip. I betcha! I betcha I can't even walk a crack, Skip. Want to bet? Looky here, Skip—just watch, now, and see if I can."

Jaddo turned and staggered uncertainly down the sidewalk as the puzzled Skip stared. But as he reached the corner he turned suddenly and bolted down the side street so fast his bandy legs looked fuzzy. He was splitting the breeze as Skip rounded the corner and shouted after him:

"If I catch yuh in town an hour from now, yuh louse, I'll—"

But the rest of his threat was lost to Jaddo's ears as he careened around another corner, into an alley. He finally slowed down to a breathless halt down by the loading pens in the railroad yards. He squared his shoulders, thrust out his chest, and grinned with satisfaction.

"Reckon I—whew—outsmarted him that time! It's swell to know yuh got—whew—brains as well as nerve!"

He perched himself on the top rail while he got back his wind.

Gradually his expression changed. Plainly, Jaddo was worried.

"A louse, am I? Wisht I'd heard the rest of what he said. Sounded like a nasty crack. Said if he caught me in town an hour from now—"

A grave problem confronted him. Fathead, his pony, was hitched to the tie-rail in front of the Monte Carlo, Queen City's speculatorium and principal business enterprise, located on the main street a few doors from Kate's restaurant. Could he get the horse without being seen by Skip?

"Aw, who's scared of the big stiff?" he bristled as he slid from the rail after a period of meditation. "I got more brains and nerve than him, any day in the week! I know what *I'll* do. I'll just outsmart him. I'll wait till it's plumb dark, and then get the hoss. Meanwhile, a little drink wouldn't do a body any harm."

An hour later Jaddo thrust his head cautiously around a corner and scouted the main street. He could see nothing of Skip among the roistering figures.

"It's dark enough to make it, if I keep away from the lights from the windows," he told himself. Boldly squaring his shoulders, he stepped forth and strode toward the tie-rail. He breathed a sigh of relief as he reached it, swung the bridle reins over Fathead's head and fitted his foot in the stirrup. Just as he swung aboard, a crackling fusilade of gunfire broke out behind him.

"Damnation," he groaned in a trembling voice as he roweled the

pony frantically. "The daggoned fool is trying to *kill* me!"

Fathead shot away like a bolt from a catapult, racing down the main street like a scared jackrabbit, with Jaddo shrinking low over the horn. They thundered around a corner and then lined out away from the town, straight across the sagebrush flats. The pony was pretty well tuckered when, at length, having satisfied himself he was not being pursued, Jaddo reined in to a walk.

"Man, oh man!" he gasped. "If that wasn't a close squeak! Who'd of thought he'd try to *kill* me, just 'cause I et at his gal's rest'rant? But I shore slickered him, once more!"

He rode a spell farther and dismounted alongside a creek. He knew of a cabin a few miles beyond which would make a swell hideout. But why should he hide, when no one was chasing him?

He knew the Fat S ranch must be somewhere nearby, but he didn't want to go there. He had resigned from the Fat S some months previously after Old Man Willets, the owner, had tapped him in the teeth with a singletree. He entertained a lurking suspicion that he wouldn't be welcome at the Fat S. Moreover, he had reasons why he didn't care to return to town.

"Shucks!" he exclaimed as he loosened Fathead's cinch. "It's warm tonight. Might as well hole up here as at the cabin."

So he picketed his mount, wrapped the draperies of the saddle blanket about him, and lay down to troubled dreams. He tossed restlessly most of the night, and had just settled down to serious sleeping when dawn brought a silver pallor to the eastern sky, and with it a range Stetson, cautiously poked above the crest of a nearby rise.

Beneath the J. B. hat was a man on hands and knees. He spotted the picketed pony, and then the sleeping Jaddo. His lips curled back from his teeth as he drew his six-gun and crept noiselessly forward. Presently he reached the side of the snoring Jaddo, whose head was pillowed on his saddle. He raised his gun, and then—

Then he brought the barrel crashing down upon the temple of the sleeping man. Jaddo's whole body quivered, and presently lay logstill. The stranger dragged the saddle from beneath his head, snatched up the blanket and made for the picketed pony. But when it was saddled and he was about to mount he hesitated, and finally turned back toward the limp form of the cowhand . . . .

THE SUN was breaking over the rimrocks when Jaddo stirred, groaned, and heaved himself up to a sitting posture. Instantly he clapped both hands to his aching brow.

"Oh, what a head!" he moaned. "I swear I'll never touch another drop!" Solemnly he crossed his heart with a trembling forefinger.

And then remembrance came flooding back. "Why, I wasn't drunk!" he muttered thickly. "Lessee, now—I brought a quart of snakebite remedy in my saddlebags, but I never touched that. After I left the loading pens I had two drinks at The Silver Dollar, four at Mike's place, and two at The Arcade. And that's all. Only seven—or is it nine? Nope, I was cold sober."

Mystified, he shook his head. The shake brought back the ache. "It must of been that dream," he decided, pressing his hand to his throbbing brow. His fingers slowly explored the lump on his forehead. He took his hand away and gazed, startled, at the spot of blood on his fingers.

"I've drempt some tough dreams," he muttered, "but never

one that belted me on the head like this!"

He reached for his hat and staggered uncertainly to his feet. He noted that it wasn't his own flop-brimmed Stetson, but another and much newer one. Mystified, he explored himself with fumbling fingers. He found a gun swinging at his hip, but it wasn't his own. He found his faded green jersey had vanished, and in its place he was wearing a shirt and vest. Instead of the familiar old, worn bullskin chaps, he was wearing a ratty pair of goatskins.

"Wait till the boys hear about this dream!" he exclaimed. "It was shore a lulu! But d'yuh s'pose they'd ever believe me?"

With a sudden start of alarm he dived into his pocket in search of the dollar and eighty cents he estimated should be there. He groaned. The coins were missing! He drew forth something he found in their place. In astonishment he gazed at the small roll of brand new bank notes in his fingers.

"Well, I'll—be—*daggoned!* What a dream! *What* a dream!"

For a long time he stood in silent thought. Then he brightened suddenly, and cried:

"*I* got it! I must be some other feller!"

Hastily he twisted about and jerked the tail of his shirt from his trousers. Completely mystified, he slowly shook his head.

"Nope; the old strawberry birthmark is still there. It's me, all right!"

He felt the need of a stimulant, and thought of the bottle of snakebite remedy. Then he discovered his saddle was missing, and his saddle blanket, and his pony. He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"A body wouldn't believe it!" he ejaculated, in wonderment. "Actually, they'd say I was lying if I told 'em a dream could do all this!"

Looking about, he "raised" the Fat S ranch buildings, farther along the creek bottoms. Even if Old Man Willets *had* taken a dislike to him, he could hardly refuse a snack to an unhorsed cowhand, he judged. Maybe he'd even lend him a horse. He started toward the ranch.

Presently a lone horsebacker appeared, riding in his direction at an easy lope. He recognized Shang Ahearn, one of the Fat S hands whom he'd never taken to, much. He waved his hat and raised a whoop, and Shang angled over toward him. The horseman took a look, and demanded:

"Gosh, man, what happened to yuh? Yuh look like somebody'd massaged yore mug with a harrow!"

"I had a dream," Jaddo began, and then broke off as he realized how futile it would be to expect anyone to believe his story. Better a good lie, any time, than something unbelievable. "I mean to say, y'understand, that my hoss piled me, and—"

"Drunk again?" broke in the rider.

"The hoss? Why, yuh daggoned fool—"

"No, not the hoss. You."

"Me? Naw. I wasn't drunk. Yuh reckon the old man would lend me a cayuse?"

Shang shrugged. "I doubt it. Y'see, during the night we lent all our spare hosses to the posse."

"The posse? What posse?"

"Ain't yuh heard? Don't yuh know the Monte Carlo gambling hop was stuck up yest'day evening? They're looking for the stick-up."

"Yuh don't say! Who done it, Shang?"

"They dunno. He was masked. But they got a good description of his clothes. And his hoss was wounded while he was making his getaway, so he couldn't of got far.

They'll know him when they see him 'cause one of the boys pistol-smacked him, and he's got a big lump on his head. Er—uh, by the way, Jaddo, how did yuh come by that wallop on yore *cabeza?*"

"That? That? Why—uh, didn't I tell yuh my hoss spilt me?"

Shang was eyeing Jaddo through narrowed lids. "Come to think of it, old-timer, I reckon everybody at the ranch will be plumb glad to see yuh. C'mon, and let's—"

Jaddo shook his head, suddenly suspicious when the man who had never been his friend called him "old-timer."

"I changed my mind, Shang. I—I just remembered something. Something important. I got to be on my way—t'other direction."

Speculatively Shang eyed the gun swinging at Jaddo's hip. Then he shrugged, and said: "Well, I got to be going. See yuh s'more, Jaddo." He kneed his pony into a lope and Jaddo, pretending he wasn't in a hurry, started in the opposite direction.

BUT as soon as he had crossed the first ridge and was out of sight he crept back through the sagebrush. Peering over the ridge he saw, as he had expected, that Shang had lined out, lickety-split, for town.

"He's going after the posse!" Jaddo gasped, as realization of the truth swept over him. He knew, now, that the shots he had believed Skip had fired at him had been those fired during the holdup of the gambling joint. He guessed that the stickup's wounded horse had played out on him; that the bandit had knocked him cuckoo while he slept, had swapped clothes with him and had stolen Fathead.

"And he shore left me in a hell-uva mess!" he cried as he scuttled down toward the protection of the willows in the creek bottoms. "If they ever catch me in these clothes, I'll shore be forking air!"

His one impelling thought was to rid himself of those incriminating clothes. When he reached the brakes he began shucking them off, tossing one garment after another into the swift waters of the creek. Hat, gun, boots, everything he tossed away in his frantic effort to rid himself of the incriminating evidence.

In nature's garment he started upstream, heading for the cabin hideout. But the gravel hurt his feet, and the willows scratched his hide painfully. Yet he dared not go into the open.

"By the time I reach the cabin, my feet'll be wore off clean up to my knees!" he cried, wincing at every step. "I'll be a skelington, 'cause these doggone branches will scrape the meat clean off'n my bones!"

He paused, panting, to take stock of the situation. An inspiration suddenly burst upon him. The Fat S ranch was nearby. At this time of day the bunkhouse should be deserted. And there were always old clothes in a bunkhouse!

Flinching before the lashing of the willow branches, he made his way toward the ranch buildings. He knew the creek flowed through the lower corral, so the stock could get to water. But when he reached the edge of the underbrush, it seemed that the hundred yards of open ground between the bunkhouse and himself had stretched out to a middling long mile.

He saw that the posse had left only a single animal in the corral—a shad-bellied and harrow-hoofed old plow plug. But hope gleamed in his eye when he saw it. Carefully he maneuvered about until the bunkhouse hid him from the ranchhouse, and then crept into the open.

As he crawled forward he heard a hymn—sung in a cracked, feminine voice. Spouting muffled cuss

words he dived back into the protection of the willows just as Ma Willets rounded the corner of the bunkhouse.

She was carrying a bucket and was chanting an old negro camp-meeting hymn: "All God's Chillun Got Clothes."

"I reckon I'm a stepchild," muttered Jaddo, shivering as he watched her fill the bucket at the creek. Breathlessly he watched her as she made her way leisurely back toward the house. She disappeared around the corner of the bunk house. He heard the kitchen door slam, and the singing ceased.

For some moments he listened intently. He knew Ma Willets always sang hymns while she was doing her housework. The silence told him she must be at work indoors. But, as he crept forward once more, he was in readiness for a lightning back-track at the first "Glory."

He thanked his lucky stars when he finally reached the bunkhouse. But there a new problem confronted him. The shack's only doorway faced the ranchhouse, and the windows were locked.

"Columbus took a chanct!" he told himself encouragingly. "And he wasn't in half the fix I'm in!"

There was nothing for it but to dart around the corner, trusting to luck that Ma wouldn't chance to look from a window during the moment it would require to dart to the bunkhouse doorway.

Now, Ma Willets always sang hymns while at work—when she could. But when she was hanging the wash out on the line and her mouth was full of clothespins, quite naturally she couldn't sing a single yip. And because Jaddo had kept the bunkhouse between himself and the dwelling he, of course, had failed to see her emerge from the kitchen with her tub of clothes.

When Jaddo darted around the corner, clad only in a determined scowl, Ma gave just one look. Then the clothespins spouted from her mouth, impelled by a terrified shriek.

"Glory be to goodness!" she screamed, and toppled over backward in a dead faint.

Jaddo was mighty sorry for Ma, but there was nothing he could do about it. He sprang to the bunkhouse door. It was locked!

There remained but one thing to do. He did it. He dashed for the clothesline and ripped off the nearest garments—a sunbonnet and one of Ma's blue house dresses. He jammed the bonnet on his head as he ran to the rear of the bunkhouse. There, in frantic haste, he arranged the dress in a ring on the ground, stepped into it, and yanked it up around him.

Cussing a blue streak and wriggling his arms into the sleeves as he ran, he high-tailed it for the corral. He flung down the bars, flopped himself across the bare back of the plow horse, and dug his bare heels into its flanks. It bolted as if a firecracker had exploded under it. But Jaddo managed to swing its head so it started upstream.

Just before Shang led the returning posse within sight of the house Ma's blood-chilling scream reached their ears. To a man, they spurred their ponies forward. They bulged over a ridge just in time to see a flash of blue gingham and the plow horse disappear into the brakes.

"He's kidnapped her!" Shang shouted hoarsely. "He's kidnapped Ma Willets! He's carrying her away on that hoss!"

"The fiend!" bellowed the sheriff. "Hanging's too good for him! But don't shoot, boys—yuh might hit Ma!"

THE POSSEMEN thundered across the clearing behind the ranch houses, and so failed to see Ma as she came to, and struggled to her feet.

Jaddo was too busy guiding his galloping steed to waste a backward glance. Hence he did not see the pursuing possemen. Still, he lost no time in heading for the cabin hideout. Something told him there would be considerable hell raised when Ma told her story. He realized *that* ranch was a good place to get away from.

Garbed as he was, he couldn't risk being caught. Nobody would believe his fantastic story, any more than they'd believe he'd had a dream which pistol-whipped him and stole his pony.

Meanwhile the sheriff was making no effort to overtake his quarry. He ordered his possemen to spread out fanwise to keep that hell-hound kidnapper from making a break into the open.

"He's holding her as a hostage, that's what he is—the polecat!" he rasped out viciously. "If we close in on him now he'll prob'ly kill her. We got to use judgment, boys—we can't afford to do nothing rash! They's a cabin back there in the scrub oak and cactus a piece, and if he holes up there, we'll surround him!"

As Jaddo neared the clearing in which the shack stood he groaned: "Riding a hoss bareback without any pants—I mean, not the hoss without pants, but the rider—ain't my idea of a picnic, exactly. I druther fork a buzz-saw, any day!"

Ahead of him a gun barked out a sudden warning. A bullet zipped through the trees many yards to his right, from which Jaddo judged the marksman had not seen him, but was shooting merely toward the sound of his horse.

"It's a warning," he concluded. "They's somebody in that cabin. And he's slinging me a hint I ain't wanted. Well, I ain't one to shove in where I ain't welcome. Whoa, Napoleon!"

But the nag wouldn't whoa. Jaddo tugged at his mane, but he kept right on. Jaddo didn't care to be carried out into the clearing where the man in the cabin could get a good shot at him. So he discreetly slid to the ground. The scrub oak and cactus and sagebrush didn't afford much protection, but nothing else was available.

Then, to his astonishment, a rifle cracked behind him. He clutched his bonnet and whirled about. From his right came another sharp report. He turned again. On his left a third gun barked. He dropped flat.

"It's that daggone posse!" he gasped. "But how in—"

A stray bullet thudded into the ground nearby. He ducked, and wriggled to a spot whence he could see the cabin.

"Well, what d'yuh know about that!" he cried out, to nobody in particular. "If there ain't my Fathead hoss hitched by that cabin! Why—why—I'll be a cockeyed horned toad if the stickup that robbed me ain't holed up there! Reckon I ain't the only one that figgered the shack would make a swell hideout!

"And the posse's got him surrounded. Man, oh man—here's my chanct to get outa this mess—if I can sneak away without being seen!"

On his hands and knees he started backing away, unaware that it was he himself whom the posse had trailed to the spot, and whom they believed to be barricaded in the cabin.

Suddenly he felt a sharp stab of pain in the seat of his house dress. Involuntarily he leaped forward again, glancing over his shoulder to ascertain the source of this unexpected attack. Then his jaw dropped, his eyes widened with horror, and the color ebbed from his face.

For there, its tail buzzing angrily, a diamondback rattler lay coiled alongside a clump of cactus!

He groaned in an agony of terror. "I—I'm *snakebit!* And in a place where I—where I can't get to it, to cauterize it, or nothing! I'm going to—going to die—less'n I can —get help!"

Heedless of the bullets humming around him he leaped to his feet. His eye fell on the pony by the cabin—Fathead, which had carried his quart of snakebite remedy in the saddlebags!

A hoarse gurgle bespoke the birth of renewed hope as he broke from his hiding place into the clearing. He had forgotten the bandit in the cabin. He had forgotten the blazing guns of the posse.

AT THE SIGHT of the skirted and bonneted figure speeding across the clearing, the astounded possemen ceased firing. None, of course, would fire at a woman. The bandit, pumping lead from a window on the farther side of the shack, failed to see the galloping Jaddo, at first. But as the firing of the posse ceased the stickup turned about, puzzled.

The door suddenly burst open. The bandit levelled his gun. But at the sight of the figure in skirts and sunbonnet, dimly outlined in the gloomy cabin interior, he held his fire. Bandit though he was he could not bring himself to shoot down a woman.

"Where's that whisky?" bellowed the lady in a frenzied voice. The next instant a bony fist crashed against the jaw of the astounded stickup, and he dropped like a log.

Without a glance at the senseless bandit, the terrorized Jaddo glanced wildly about the cabin. In one corner he saw his upended saddle, and made a frantic dive for it. He squatted on his heels as eager fingers fumbled with the saddlebags.

But another sharp stab of pain, in the same spot where the snake had bitten him, sent him leaping to his feet. He clapped a hand to the seat of his dress.

A mystified expression suddenly spread over his face. Slowly he drew his hand away. Dumbfounded, he stared at the cactus spines he had plucked from his anatomy.

"Well—I'll—be—" he ejaculated. "Why, I wasn't snakebit, at all! I must of just backed into that cactus clump!"

He whirled about and snatched up the gun which had dropped from the stickup's hand. Then he stuck his head out the door and roared at the possemen:

"Come and get yore lousy bandit, 'fore I throw him away!"

A moment later the sheriff and his deputies surged through the cabin door.

"Theer he is, gents," announced Jaddo loftily, pointing at the limp form. "They's a lump on his head which will identify him, and yuh'll find the loot in his pockets. I always knowed Skip Carberry was a crook!"

The sheriff rushed toward him and began wringing his hand.

" 'Twas the beatenest thing ever *I* see, Ma! Just to think—"

"Ma?" interrupted Jaddo, puzzled. Then, suddenly remembering, he jerked off the sunbonnet. "It's me—Jaddo Baggs."

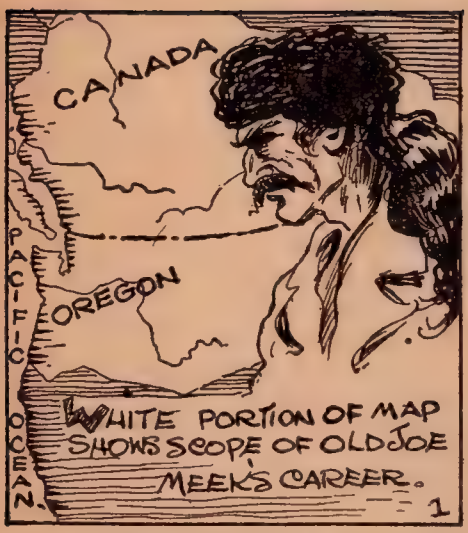
"Jaddo!" cried the amazed sheriff. "Why, I thought—" He swallowed, and then went on admiringly: "I don't care—'twas the slickest piece of crook-catching ever happened herabouts!"

Jaddo's chest swelled with pride beneath his frock.

"Aw," he protested modestly, " 'twasn't much—not for a gent with brains and nerve. Although it *did* take a heap of planning. The only reason I troubled myself to do it was 'cause this Skip gent done insulted a lady friend of mine by saying the grub in her rest'rant would choke a hog. Which is a lie, 'cause it didn't choke *me!*"

Life of Old

"First Sheriff



No. 1—A history of the Old West would not be complete without the mention of "Old Joe" Meek, hunter, trapper and explorer. Meek was rough and he-man to the core. In his own words, he was "A hell-roarin' boozer!" He was the typical hard-bitten pioneer to whom the United States will ever be in debt.

No. 2—Meek was an "engage" with Smith, Jackson and Sublet, three of America's famous trail blazers. Once, while on a trip to found a new trapping station, he saw two Indians approaching the camp where they were laying over for a day or two. Old Joe picked up his gun, fired and killed one of them. The other fled.

No. 3—Sublet was angry and wanted to know why Meek had committed such a wanton act. "Why," said Old Joe, "He was robbin' traps!"

"Traps?" retorted Sublet, "There isn't one within three hundred miles from here!"

"Well, anyway," grinned Meek, "he looked like he was goin' to so it's all the same, ain't it?"

No. 4—Old Joe Meek was with Smith in California and later with Fremont. He left the latter after the massacre of the Indians on the Umpqua by the so-called Pathfinder and went to Oregon. Here Meek joined up with the early American settlers. Old Joe was a nomad, seemingly never having been satisfied to stay in one place very long. His services however were sought all over that territory and his fame was beginning to spread.

Joe Meek of the Old West"

Next Month—Life of Courtright, The Long-Haired One of the West's Deadliest Gunmen

No. 5—He was one of the last of the real old Indian fighters and fought against a half-dozen tribes of the Northwestern plains under Fremont and several other pioneers. As an "engage" he was unequalled and often assumed greater authority than the men who employed him and made them like it. It is doubtful if any man at the time knew more about the Northwest than Old Joe. About this time, the territory was becoming the storm center for avid nations who realized the wealth and advantages of such a country.

No. 6—In 1853 the settlers of the new country west of the Rockies met at Champoeg on the Wallamat and organized a provincial government, a step forced upon them by the plotting of the Hudson's Bay Company who wished to keep Americans out of the Northwest. Old Joe Meek took a prominent part in the proceedings and showed all those present that in addition to being a peerless trail blazer, he was a diplomat albeit a crude and blunt one.

No. 7—At this meeting The Reverend Father Blanchet represented the Hudson's Bay Company and a man named Le Breton backed the cause of the Americans. Old Joe Meek defied his foes and getting on his feet, shouted, "We want a division! Cheers for our side and be danged to the Hudson's Bay Company!" Dr. Whitman, of whose influence the Jesuits were jealous, saved the Northwest for the Americans by riding clear across country to place the matter before President Tyler.

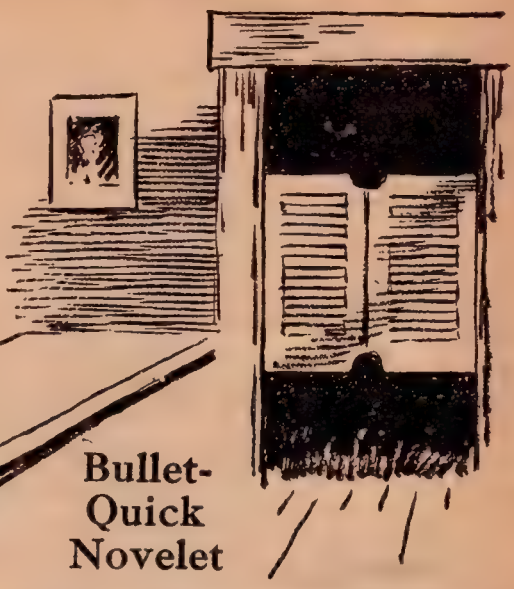
No. 8—Old Joe Meek's services at Champoeg, together with his reputation as a fearless and just leader, brought about his election as sheriff, an office he filled to the credit of himself and his people. So to the old pioneer went the honor of being the first American peace officer west of the Rockies, a shot-gun sheriff who antedated the individual who dispensed "Law west of the Pecos" by decades.

Montana Mavericks

By LES RIVERS

Author of "Riders of Retribution," "Twin-Trigger Gentry," etc.

He waited quietly—patiently



Bullet-Quick Novelet

Jim Farrell waited for the showdown in Wolf's place. They would come—all three at once. They'd gun a hombre's back as quick as his front—quicker. Then Wolf set up his ace-in-the-hole—and the Montana foothills rumbled with the steel throats of vengeance!

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF FARRELL

UP AND DOWN the whole great length of the valley the news flashed. It was as if a system of signaling had been prearranged to give the warning, for from town to town and from ranch to ranch the word was passed along with the speed of the wind that Jim Farrell was headed homeward. In a single day it jumped clear to the center of that wide and sweeping valley and it stirred the town of Lonesome like nothing had in years. The news fairly turned it upside down with excitement and apprehension. For the returning of Jim Farrell meant a lot to that town. It meant so almighty much that a certain number of its citizens buckled on their truest weapons and called a hurried consultation. By dusk, the whole crowd of them had gathered in the shack in which Bill Laser lived; and to the last one, their faces were hard and grim.

No one had even so much as dreamed of this unexpected turning of events that freed Farrell. The law had had him. It had arrested him for a crime of which he could never escape conviction. The town of Lonesome knew this, for each of its men had had his part in stacking the evi-

dence strongly against him. And they truly thought he was guilty. There was Small and Lasar and one or two others who had seen him do the shooting. It had been they who first pointed the finger upon him. And was there anyone in the valley who would not believe Lasar or Small or Rockford, or even Channing? Not a man would dare, or even dream of it. So each of them remembered some small thing in the past that Farrell might have done. And they painted his name and his character so black that when the law took him, he stood not a chance for his safety, nor even for his life. And not a few sighed with relief when the sheriff rode off with him on the first leg of a journey that would lead him to the Montana gallows.

But somehow, an impossible thing had happened. A thing that no one could hardly believe had happened. For young Jim Farrell had slipped through the fingers of the law and he was headed back toward Lonesome, unhampered.

He rode back a free man, but the news of his coming preceded him by a full day. It swept like wildfire up the valley. And Lonesome and the whole valley waited and watched for his arrival. They waited breathlessly, for they knew that on the very moment that Farrell reached his home, trouble would burst like a bomb over the valley. So, with grim faces, the men waited for the first sign of it. And woman-like, every girl the full length of that thirty thousand acre valley was held in sheer delight of the promised excitement. For where is there a woman who will not think a man a hero if everyone is against him? They waited for Jim Farrell, their hearts fluttering, thrilled at the thought that they might catch a glimpse of him as he rode through the valley, to them a hero, a warrior, who was returning to right a wrong that had been done him.

But of these things, Farrell gave no thought. The last two months had changed him greatly. They had changed him so completely that the man who rode back into Lonesome Valley was no longer the smiling youth his erstwhile friends had known; for that smile had been rubbed from his face and in its stead a hard and somber mask had come. His sunbrowned face bore lines that had not been there on the outward journey. His strong, lean jaw was thrust forward in a grim and certain way that spoke with far more eloquence than could words. And the gray, calm eyes of Farrell were as cold and as hard as chiseled steel, as he let them drift out across the fertile reach of the valley.

This had been his home. This had been the place where all the friends he had were gathered. And yet all of them had turned against him. They had turned upon him like a pack of hungry wolves turn upon a fallen member, snarling and fighting for his life. But rising up with the weight of that crushing and damning evidence they had piled upon him, Farrell had proven his innocence enough to be given his freedom. And now he was riding back to pay off the score in full. And as he rode along, he seemed for the first time in his life conscious of those heavy, low-slung guns upon his thighs. For the first time they seemed a part of him; and a mighty important part they were destined to play. He remembered the laborious hours he had spent each day with those guns, perfecting the draw, steadying the hand until he could sweep it down and up and press the trigger in one smooth, free and deadly motion. He remembered the first day that he reached a point of skill where he could snuff off the head of a swiftly flying bird without touching the body with the bullet. It had all seemed foolish and useless then. It had seemed a waste of time. But as he thought of it now a smile came to his lips; and the smile was hard and grim.

The news of his coming had raced up the valley before him, but Farrell did not hasten. He could guess that they were waiting for him; perhaps even planning his destruction. But he only smiled and went steadily onward, his eyes grim and coldly steady as they swept over the reach of the valley.

DUSK fell, and coming suddenly from ahead, like a challenger to meet the threat of the creeping shadows, a maze of blinking lights showed themselves. They sprang up before Farrell with sudden unexpectedness, nestling in the heart of the valley's slope. That was Lonesome, he knew. But even with the lights of the town before him, he did not go directly toward it. A slight touch of the reins turned his tired horse off to the right of the trail and he cut across the open of the valley. He had one thing to do before he went into Lonesome. And that was to see Sue Chappell and to find if she still thought of him in the old way, or if she, too, had turned against him with the others. So, he let his tired horse drift across the valley's floor at a slow lope, skirting the lights of the town and circling around to the far side.

He followed the twisting of the road that pierced the foothills. He listened to the hoofs of his horse thudding into the deep, dry dust of the roadbed. Ahead of him the twisting of the trail gleamed white in the moonlight and he followed it, his hands holster-alert. He came at last to a shadowed lane that turned sharply off to the right. And he turned into it, drawing his horse to a slow walk for silence.

Ahead of him he saw the dark blotch of the Chappell house, with a few of the front windows brightly lighted. The beams streamed out at him through the darkness, as if mocking him with their cheery coziness. They seemed to tell him that he had lost something—something that he could not bring back. And he felt it, as he sat there in the saddle and looked into the comfortably cool front room of the Chappell house. He knew as sure as he sat there that his past was behind him and that no such thing as days of peace and contentment lay ahead. But the only change that came over his face was a slight tightening of his lips and a harder glint in his gray eyes.

He dismounted and went forward on foot. And he stole from shadow to shadow with the silent grace of a cat, stirring not a leaf, nor cracking not a twig beneath his foot. In the old days the Chappells had been his friends; but now he did not know if even they were with him. He had no way of knowing whether or not they had gone over to the side of his enemies, and Farrell was not a man to walk blindly into a trap, if a trap it should prove to be. The townsmen might expect this to be his first stop. If they had any cunning about them, they were likely to guess it and be ready at the house to take him. So he went forward slowly, cautiously, and came without a sound to the very side of the house.

There he paused and looked through the window again. He could see old John Chappell sitting in an easy chair, smoking his pipe slowly, staring off into space as he mused silently. And it seemed to him that the hair of Chappell was whiter and that the leathery tan of his face was more wrinkled and care-worn than it had been. The girl was there in the room, too. She moved about restlessly, coming once or twice to the window to look out at the night, as if she expected someone and was worried about their arrival. The eyes of Farrell followed her, drinking in the beauty of her face, marveling at the smooth and graceful strength of her slender, supple body. Seeing her again was enough to send the heart and the hopes of Farrell soaring into the very clouds. He watched her, and knotted his fists fiercely in the darkness as he thought of how his future

had been smashed by the men of Lonesome.

He saw her go into another room and saw a light spring suddenly from its window. And on the moment he was beneath it. He raised himself slowly, for the window was up and he could plainly hear her moving about inside. He raised himself and looked in; and there she was, no more than arm's reach away. He gripped suddenly at the window sill, as if that might strengthen his failing courage, for the moment was at hand when he would find what Sue Chappell still thought of him. Then, with a grim smile, he tapped softly upon the casing and stepped back from the window.

HE HEARD her catch her breath sharply, as if in startled surprise. There was a brief moment of silence. Then she came to the window and looked out into the darkness. He was partly in the shadows, but she saw him almost at once and her head lifted suddenly with a slight start.

"Who are you?" she said, calmly, in the steady and even voice that he remembered so well. "What do you want here?"

Another girl might have been expected to slam down the window and rush, screaming for help, from the room. But not Sue Chappell. She was steady and sure in her way. There was not even a tremor in her voice as she leaned out the window and spoke to him. He smiled as he saw this and stepped out where the moonlight struck him full in the face. And she gasped with a sharp intake of her breath as she saw him.

"Jim! Jim!" she cried, softly.

"It's me, Sue."

"And you came here first as I hoped you would."

"Well, I wasn't sure about it," said he. "I didn't know how you'd take me. I wasn't so sure that you'd want to see me, after all that's happened an' what people have said about me. But here I am, Sue, an' you can tell me to clear out if you want. I won't be blamin' you. You've gotta right to not want to see me."

She lifted herself up with an easy, graceful strength and with a simple twisting of her body, slipped through the window and dropped lightly beside him. And the effort did not even quicken her breathing. She dropped lightly beside him, and her joy was revealed in a rush of low, musical laughter. She caught one of his hands and held it tightly in her own.

"Jim Farrell," said she, "I would never have forgiven you, if you hadn't come here first. Now quit your foolish excuses. Do you suppose it would make any difference? Have you forgotten our past together? Well, that should mean something to you."

"It sure does, Sue," said Farrell. "An' it means a lot more to me this minute than it ever did before. I'm seein' for the first time the true size of you. An' seein' that you're a lot too good for me. I wasn't expectin' you to meet me exactly like this."

"Don't talk like that, Jim. But tell me, why did you put yourself in all this danger by coming back here? You should have written and I would have come to you. You know that I would have. Since I first heard that you were coming back to Lonesome, I have worried for fear that some of them would kill you. Don't you realize that you have enemies all around you here in the valley?"

"Yes," said he, quietly. "I reckon that I have."

"Then why did you come back, Jim?"

"I reckon that's why," he answered.

"I don't understand you, Jim. You've changed. You're harder. You're like a different man, Jim. Tell me," she added, a little breathlessly, "what are you planning?"

"Well, I dunno exactly. There's a few men here in the valley that did all they could to push me under. An' they went clear outta their way to do it. Is there anybody that needs payin'

off more'n Channing an' his gang? I reckon not. An' mebbe I'll do it."

"You mean you've come back to fight Channing and his men?" she gasped, in a strained voice. "You'd pit yourself single-handed against all those odds? Jim, think! You'd have everything to lose if you did that; and you'd have nothing to gain. What chance would you have against all of them? It would be like throwing your life away, Jim. It would, surely!"

"You'd have me run from them?" said Farrell, with a hard, mirthless smile. "You'd have me clear outta the country an' leave them with all the honors? It wouldn't do, girl. What would you think of me afterwards, if I'd run from them now? Would you be proud of bein' the wife of a man that's branded a coward? Well, I reckon not, Sue."

"Ah, Jim, I can see your side of it well enough," said she. "It's a question of honor with you. You think that there is no other thing for you to do but go out and fight your enemies. You're thinking that that will put everything straight and in its place again. But stop and think of the danger. Think of the odds against you. You wouldn't stand a chance, not even a ghost of a chance, facing all of those men in Lonesome. Forget the honor side of it, Jim, and think of me. I'd rather have them think you ran, and have you with me, than to see them shoot you down like they surely would."

"I reckon you're not meanin' what you say, Sue," said Farrell, gently. "An' you're a bit wrong. Honor, it don't come in on this deal at all. It ain't for that that I'm goin' into Lonesome."

"Then why must you go?" she cried. "Is it simply to fight? Is that it? Have you lost all of the old Jim?"

"A lot of it, I reckon," said Farrell, gently. "I've been through enough to bring it about, haven't I? But I'll tell you why I'm goin' in to see them. What's become of everything I owned? What's happened to my ranch while I was gone?"

SHE was silent for a long moment, and he went on:

"Five years I worked on it, buildin' it up an' makin' it ready for you an' me, Sue. I put a lotta work into that place. An' I'd got it pretty well on its feet. Now tell me who's taken it over. Tell me who's stolen it while I was up before the court."

"It was Gaster Small, I guess," she answered in a small and frightened voice. Never before had she heard Jim Farrell speak with such grim strength in his voice.

"Right, it was Small. An' who else?" he pressed her.

"Bill Lasar, they say," she continued, faintly. "But, Jim! Those two—they're both famed gunmen. You couldn't face them both."

"Lasar an' Small," said he, grimly and unmindful. "The two of them, they pretty near got away with it, too. They figgered that the law had me where I wouldn't get away. An' they were gonna make a clean sweep of everything I had. Well, Sue, there's the first reason. But that ain't all. That's only the beginning of what was done to me. Who was the leader of them that turned the law upon me? Who was it that started the lie and turned all the trouble upon me? It was Channing, Sue. An' Channing's gonna pay for it!"

"Jim! Don't say that!" she gasped. "Don't say the name of that killer. Don't say you'd face him. Don't even think of it!"

He looked down at her for a silent moment, wondering at her strange and violent outburst. Then he frowned slowly and tipped up her head with a gentle hand beneath her chin until the moonlight fell full upon her beautiful, pale face.

"What is it, Sue?" he said, his teeth hard clenched. "Channing scares you. Has he been botherin' you any? Tell me!" The ring of his voice was like the rasping of steel. It froze

the heart within her and left her standing rigid and breathless. Then she spoke, faintly, but clearly:

"He's been around, Jim," she said. "Dad couldn't stop him. He tried, but who can tell Channing what he will and will not do? Ah, but, Jim—it's nothing. Nothing's happened to worry about. I'll go away with you and none of them will ever see us again."

Jim Farrell had dropped his hand from her chin. He stood looking straight ahead. And she chilled as she saw the grim, hard mask that had come upon his face. His arms hung at his sides, but his hands were balled into rock-hard fists.

"So he's gone a step further now?" his voice was hard and terse. "He's not satisfied with what he's already done? Well, I'll add it down. An' when we meet, it's gonna be Channing or me."

She swayed against him weakly. And with a hopeless, futile strength, caught at his arms.

"Jim! You can't mean that. Channing is a born gunman. He makes his living by killing. He'd shoot you down without a chance for your life. It'd be like murder. Tell me you won't go. Promise me, Jim!"

But any answer he might have had was cut off by a shadow that fell suddenly at his feet. And a rumbling voice broke the silence.

"What's this, Sue? Who you out here talkin' with?"

Farrell whirled about and there before him he saw the great form of John Chappell. The old man stood looking into his face for a moment and then, with a wide grim of welcome, he hurried forward and grasped Farrell by the hand.

"Jim, my boy, is it really you back?" he cried, heartily. "By grab, it's good to see you."

"You're still with me, Chappell?" smiled Farrell. "I was wonderin' if you would be, or if you'd gone over to the other side of thinkin'."

"With you? You're damned right I am. But come into the house, Jim. Come inside."

"Sure—later on," smiled Farrell. "But first, I'm goin' in to Lonesome. There's a few things that I gotta do in town. I'll be seein' the two of you later."

CHAPTER II

Attempted Murder

AT THAT time of the evening Wolf's Saloon was comparatively empty. It was the hour when the trade was slackest, after the first spurt of the evening's playing was over and before the night life of Lonesome began in earnest. So, during this lull, Joe Wolf was behind his bar, polishing its shiny, hard-worn top and wiping the glasses until they glistened in the light, then stacking them in neat, straight rows on the shelf behind him. And all the while he was thus occupied, he kept his eye on the door for the first of the evening's customers and on the three or four stragglers who still hung about one of the tables. But there was no money in that group and he knew it. So he offered them no service. He waited and watched the door for new arrivals.

And so it was he who first saw the door open and admit Jim Farrell. He started at the unexpected entrance of this grim and stern-faced youth and came near dropping the glass he had been wiping. For this was something that even Wolf had not expected. He knew, as everyone else did, that Farrell had headed back for Lonesome. But all the while in the back of his mind was the thought that Farrell would not really return to the town. And now here he was in the very saloon where all his enemies gathered. And he came with a grim face and with his ponderous Colts tied snugly upon his thighs.

That was enough to prove to Wolf that trouble was brewing and he cast

a helpless glance over his property and then, with a sigh of helplessness, turned to look again upon the grim-faced youth who had entered. But Farrell had not paused. He walked slowly along the length of the bar. He strode with the silent ease of a great cat to the very back of the room. And there he leaned his elbows upon the end of the bar.

The four had looked up from their tables at his entrance. And every one of them recognized him at once. They fell into a silence and stared after him as he moved to the back of the room. Then one of their number quietly slipped out of the door. There were men in town who must hear of Farrell's coming, and he would be the first to give that news. He slipped out and disappeared into the night.

But Farrell seemed not to notice his furtive departure. His stone-cold face was a mask over which no emotion passed. A slight, almost imperceptible smile was upon his straight, grim lips as he leaned easily against the bar and motioned Wolf toward him. And seeing that brief wave of the hand toward him, the saloon-keeper started. His heart leaped up into his throat and a wave of fear took him. But not for an instant did he dream of refusing that order of Farrell's. He could almost see death striking swiftly at him if he so much as even hesitated. So, wiping his fat hands upon his apron, he waddled down behind the bar before Farrell. And he approached Farrell as if he was walking into an open grave.

"Howdy, Farrell! Howdy, my boy!" said he, a weak and smirking smile upon his fat face. "A nice evening. A pleasant evening for you to be coming back to your home town. I'll bet it's good to be back, eh? Anyway, it's good to see you again, my boy. You're looking fine. You're looking better than I ever saw you, Farrell. A change of climate was good for you, maybe. It gave you the rest you needed." He laughed weakly, but the effort was only a miserable grimace. "And what can I be doing for you?" he added.

The cold mask had not left the face of Farrell. A feeling of contempt struck him for Wolf's weakness. But no sign of it showed in his grim face.

"Gimme a glass of something," he said. "No matter what. But hurry it up."

"The best in the house for you, Jimmie, my boy," smirked the bartender. "And it won't cost you a thing. It'll be on me to celebrate your home-coming. How does that look to you?"

"It's all right," said Farrell, with scant interest. And he threw a silver dollar upon the bar.

"Here! Here! Jimmie." cried Wolf. "You don't have to go and do that. This drink will be on me. And I'm glad to be able to do it. I'm that glad to see you back in Lonesome again."

Farrell did not speak. He merely stood there and looked across at Wolf and something in the depths of his cold grey eyes left the bartender standing there, his jaw sagging. He even backed a step or two away, a clammy sweat breaking out on his brow.

"There ain't nothing wrong, is there, Jimmie?" he said, his voice a hoarse, half-groan. "You ain't got nothing in your head, have you, about what maybe folks have said against Lonesome? Let me tell you, Jimmie, there ain't nothing in any of it. We're all sorry as hell for what happened and we're glad to see you with us again. You can take it from me that that's the gospel truth."

Again the silence of Farrell answered him. And this time the strain was too much for Wolf to face. He set up the drink, then turned like a frightened rabbit, and waddled back to his former position at the bar. And, with renewed energy, he went to work again at the wiping of his glasses.

The dead silence continued in the room. There was not even a clinking

of chips at the table where the three still sat, their holding in a fascinated way upon Jim Farrell. And whenever their eyes did leave him, it was to cast an anxious, sidelong glance toward the door. For they knew that through it trouble would soon be coming. And they wanted to know it in time to pick out a safe point of vantage.

The passage of five minutes or more found the silence still unbroken. Farrell stood calmly at the back of the room, toying with the glass which he had not yet raised from the bar. He let his eyes rest tentatively upon it as he turned it around with a steady and gentle twirling of his fingers. Suddenly, then, he raised his head and motioned the bartender toward him. Wolf gulped, as a sudden fear took him. He nervously laid aside the glass and the towel, and turning with a slow and heavy tread he came down the length of the bar toward Farrell.

"Wolf," said Jim, "I'm not as thirsty as I thought. I'm not near as thirsty, nor as dry, I reckon. An' it'd be a shame to pour this glass out, bein' it's the best grade you got in the house. So I've called you down here to drink it for me. You can say that it's a treat on me, if you like. But drink it up so it won't be wasted."

"Shucks, Jimmie!" said Wolf, forcing a strained and sickly smile to his sweating face. "So that's it, is it? Well, you don't have to worry none about that. There's plenty more where this came from. And all you gotta do is holler to get it. We'll just dump this one out and wait until you want another one. How's that, Jimmie?"

"I reckon it's not so good," said Farrell, in an even and quiet voice. "That much of a drink would be worth a pound of gold to a man who's dyin' of thirst on a desert. An' I don't like to see it wasted. Pick it up Wolf, an' down it."

"One glass? Why hell, that's nothing Jimmie. Not more'n a drop of water in the ocean." Wolf was gaining confidence. He grinned a little as he faced Farrell. "We'll just chuck this one and forget all about it. I'm here to please you, don't forget that."

"Well then," said Jim Farrell, smiling grimly, "you pick up that glass Wolf. Lift it easy so you won't spill any, because I want to see all of it roll down your throat. An' you do it now, or do I have to pull the trigger of this here gun?"

THE gentle voice of Farrell hit the bartender like a whip lash. It jerked his fishy, pale blue eyes down to the bar and held them there in a hypnotized sort of way. He had seen no movement of either of Farrell's hands, yet there upon the edge of the bar rested the barrel of one of his heavy forty-fives, its muzzle wavering not the fraction of an inch from his middle. If ever Wolf saw death, he saw it then in the hard, gray eyes of Farrell. And he saw at the same instant that that grim strength of the youth could never be turned by words. Half dazed by the wild fear that clutched at his heart, he reached across and picked up the glass. He raised it half way to his lips and then he stopped, paralyzed by yet another fear.

"I can't do it, Jimmie," he moaned. "I've swore off an' if I drink this, I'd be breaking my word to myself. And there ain't nothing that could be worse than that to me."

"Drink," said Farrell, as hard-toned and as cold as a chunk of ice.

For a moment the bartender hesitated. Then, with an oath, he dashed the glass of liquor from him. It fell with a splintering crash and a dark stain from the liquor ran across the floor behind the bar. And Wolf faced him, for the first time showing a grain of bravery.

"All right, Jimmie," said he, "you go ahead and shoot. That death, it wouldn't be as bad as the other. Go

on and let me have it. I'd rather go out that way than the other."

"Sure," smiled Farrell, slowly. "That's what I thought."

"You saw me put it in the glass?" asked Wolf, still finding his voice, somehow.

"I'd have been pretty blind if I hadn't," said Farrell, grimly. "I saw you put it in. But tell me, what kind was you usin', Wolf?"

"Strychnine," said Wolf, roughly and hopelessly.

"That's a bad poison. A pretty sure an' painful death. You were gonna make it easy for the others, were you, Wolf? You were gonna get me laid away before they even came in, is that right?" The voice of Farrell was grim. His gun was as steady as rock.

"All of that's true," said the bartender, meeting the eye of Farrell steadily. "I was going to salt you away if I could. It didn't matter much how I did it. There was a thousand dollars on your head and I aimed to collect it. I've been a dog, Jimmie, and I ought to be treated like a dog. Go ahead and pull the trigger. It's what I got coming."

"You've done more'n I expected," said Farrell, unsmilingly. "You've come out in the open an' admitted it. Now get back to your work an' don't bother me any more."

"Do you mean it Jimmie?" gasped Wolf. "Do you mean it? By grab, you do!"

CHAPTER III

A Question Settled

AS IF he had been handed back his life after it had been snatched from him, the bartender stared across at Farrell. He seemed slow in coming to the full realization that he was free to go his way. He had expected to die and could not understand why he was still living. But then, with another gasp of startled surprise, he swung about and waddled up the length of the bar. And in a dazed trance he went to work again, wiping and wiping upon a single glass and not even knowing that he was doing it.

Again the hushed silence of expectancy fell upon the room. The three men at the table watched Farrell, stealing a glance now and again at the door and looking contemptuously upon Wolf as their eyes passed him. Then the evidence that the news of Farrell's coming had been passed around began to show itself. Men came in groups of two and three. They straggled in one after the other, these small groups, drawn with the curiosity of seeing Farrell again and seeing how he had come back to Lonesome. For they knew that trouble would soon burst like a bomb in Wolf's Saloon and they wanted to be on hand to watch it. They pushed open the swinging doors and every last man of them paused for an instant upon the threshold to scan the room and see on which side the danger lay thickest. Then they entered and wandered with a seemingly aimless air to the side of the room where the tables were clustered and from where the three had watched Farrell call the play of Wolf.

They flocked in, filling the room with smoke and with a strained kind of laughter and talking. But none came near the bar. They left it an open stretch from the point at the back where Farrell stood to the very door itself. And even if one of them had been brave enough to come up, he would not have been served. For Wolf was still wiping the single glass and staring in a vacant-eyed way across the smoke-filled room. He was standing there in a daze and not seeming to know what was going on around him. His sight and his mind was wandering. He was finding for the first time what a clean joy it was to be alive and seeing, also that it was Farrell who had given him that chance to live. Farrell! And after he had just tried to poison him!

But Farrell had no thoughts for the bartender. He leaned gently against the end of the bar and his calm eyes went quietly over every man that entered. Then at last the tension came to the breaking point. The thing for which all of them waited happened. The doors swung inward slowly and a pair of grim-visaged men stepped into the barroom. A wave of sound went over the room at their entrance. Then it fell deathly silent. The two paused for an instant, their grim, narrow-lidded eyes sweeping the room at a single glance. And when they fell on Farrell at the back of the room, each of them sneered openly.

And Farrell faced them, smiling. Here were two of the men who had caused him all of his troubles; two of those who had sent him away with his name blackened. Here was Gaster Small and Bill Lasar, the two who were famed the length and the breadth of the valley for their fighting ability with every kind of weapon. These two gunmen never parted and they never failed to get their man.

Small and Lasar did not hesitate. They shot a quick glance at one another and then with a slouching, easy gait, strode directly down the length of the bar toward Farrell. They strode slowly forward, their elbows brushing together, their strong lean hands hooked carelessly in their belts. And as they moved nearer Farrell, the sneer continued upon their faces until their lips curled evilly. But the calm of Farrell was not for a moment shaken. Then the men stopped some ten feet from the youth and turned to the bar. One of them raised his voice.

"Wolf!" he said. "This place of yours is gettin' so it ain't good enough for a man anymore. You've gone an' let in a new kind of snake today, I see."

"Right, Wolf, you've let in two kinds of snakes." The quiet voice of Farrell went easily across the room, freezing every one of the listeners on its further side. "An' they're pretty low, both of them. I dunno how they managed to even crawl up where a real man oughta stand."

His words were enough to freeze the men behind him with the nearness of danger. And they were enough to jerk up the heads of the two gunmen beside him and turn Bill Lasar around with a snarl of rage rumbling in his throat. Gaster Small dropped a hand to his gun-butt and stared threateningly upon Farrell.

"Kid!" snarled Lasar, "them words of yours don't sound so good to me. Are you meanin' us, by any chance? Speak up! Are you aimin' them words at us, kid?"

"Well, Lasar," said Farrell with a slow, grim-lipped smile, "what d'you think? Mebbe now they could fit you without a lotta turnin' around. You can make up your mind what needs changin'."

"You lemme say this, Farrell," snarled the gunman viciously. "Lonesome, it ain't big enough for you an' us two at the same time. D'you understand kid?"

"I understand pretty well," smiled Farrell. "An' I dunno as I can name a town anywhere that's big enough for that. But *I* am to stay on here in Lonesome until I figger I'd like to move on. Do I make that clear to you gents?"

"You make it clear all right. You make it plenty clear that we gotta move you on your way," said Small, his voice a mere hissing sound. "You've stayed your time out in Lonesome. We're gonna start you on your way Farrell, an' it's gonna be a mighty long journey."

"Lasar an' Small," said Farrell, evenly. "I reckon this has gone far enough. I'm facin' both of you. I'm givin' you the odds of two to one an' I'm callin' your play. Now go ahead an' throw your iron an' we'll see if you pay for all the hell you've heaped on me. I'm waitin' for you gents. Get started!"

But neither of them moved. They stared into the grim, hard face of Farrell as if for the first time they were seeing him; and seeing in him a size of which they had never even dreamed. They were silent and the bronzed, emotionless face of Farrell hardened.

"It's got you, has it, to meet a man face to face?" he said. "You aim to wait until you've gotta better chance than two to one? Neither one of you're good enough to be classed along by the side of a snake!"

It happened then.

NO MAN in all the valley, nor anywhere in the west for that matter, could have quietly taken that insult. It called for action alone to answer it. And that action was swift in striking.

Both of the gunmen acted in unison. They leaped apart and their hands swept downward like the darting heads of rattlesnakes. The very speed of their draw was appalling. It seemed to leave not the bare thread of hope for Farrell. It seemed that already the end of his short trail was reached.

Strangely enough at that moment, Farrell remembered all the careful practice he had spent with those guns of his. He remembered how he had perfected the art of drawing his guns and bringing their muzzles to the heart of the target with a single, flashing roll of his hands. And now he smiled as he saw with what ease he could do it, for there he was standing with both of his weapons ready in his hands before either of the two famed fighters had so much as cleared their guns from the holsters. The outcome was perfectly obvious to everyone. Then havoc swept through Wolf's Saloon!

The room rocked with the thunderous roar of weapons. Flame swept from their yawning muzzles. A cloud of blue, swirling smoke drifted across the open. And then as suddenly, it was over. The room cleared as the smoke drifted away. And there on the floor beside the bar rail the crowd saw Lasar, stretched in death. Small was still on his feet, but he was dying swiftly. He hung to the edge of the bar for support, weaving and sagging as the failing strength of his arms refused to hold him erect. Then he buckled and fell heavily at the side of Lasar.

Jim Farrell stood at the end of the bar, his smoking weapons still balanced lightly in his hands. He stood there, and for a long and silent moment he looked down at the outstretched bodies of his fallen enemies. Two men had died for that bullet-burn on his neck. Then he loaded his guns and slipped them into his holsters.

And they had no more than dropped from his hands than a hard, round object was pressed against his side and a rough voice spoke in his ear. The man had hidden himself behind the bar and when Farrell had come up to it again, he had only to step silently out and behind him. He rammed his gun against the side of Farrel with a rough and throaty order.

"All right, Farrell! You make no false moves an' everything's gonna be all right. I'm arrestin' you for this killin'. Are you gonna come along peaceful or not?"

Farrell turned and looked into the coarse-featured face of the sheriff. He frowned.

"You saw it, didn't you?" he said. "You saw them get a square break in what happened here!"

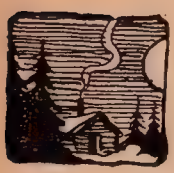
"I saw nothin' of the kind," snarled the sheriff. "I saw you do the killin' an' that's enough to hang you. You forced the fight an' you didn't give them a chance."

"I reckon, then," said Farrell, twisting aside in a dazzling swift movement that sent the gun of the sheriff spinning to the floor, "that I gotta carry on with this." His guns swept again into his hands wavering

over the crowd. "Hold it," he said tersely. "Watch yourselves that you don't step into trouble. I'm not givin' myself up."

CHAPTER IV

SURRENDER!



HE BACKED slowly to the rear wall where he had seen the door leading out to the back of the saloon. And all the while his guns went over the crowd, holding them in their places, tensely watching. Then he reached the wall and holstered one of his weapons. Reaching behind him, yet never taking his eyes from the crowd, he found the door and swung it open. There he stood for a moment, his eyes roving from face to face.

"You'll follow me, I reckon," he said, tight-lipped. "Some of you will, anyway. An' I want to say this to any of you that's got that idea. It's plain enough that the sheriff here don't figger on givin' me a square deal. He's aimin' to shove me outside the law. Well, if I gotta be called an outlaw, I'm gonna have more than the name. So remember this. The man that presses me too close is gonna feel my lead an' I'm not gonna be foolin' when I pull the trigger."

Then he was gone. Like a shadow, he vanished from the doorway, leaping back and into the darkness of the yard behind the saloon. And his foresight in leaving his mount there at the rear of the saloon now stood him in good stead. He had only to jerk up the reins and swing swiftly into the saddle. And then he was swept quickly out of town toward the open of the valley.

But even at that, he had none too much of a head start. And then, he was riding an already tired horse. It was almost a hopeless thing to even dream that he could escape the mob that poured from the saloon the moment he was gone. They rushed out into the street, every last one of them. And leaping upon their horses, they took up Farrell's trail.

He headed directly toward Chappell's ranch, for he knew that he must have a fresh mount and Chappell was the only man in the valley from whom he could get it. And he called out the last of his tired mount's strength in that race down the floor of the valley. He brought it lathered and staggering into the yard before the house and he swung down even before the horse came to its laboring, floundering stop.

From inside the house Chappell and the girl had heard that frantic pounding of hoofs coming down the road toward them and they were waiting anxiously upon the porch for him when he swept with a cloud of dust into the yard.

"Farrell!" cried the old man. "What happened, boy? What's wrong?"

"No time to explain now," said Farrell, tersely. "I'm in bad need of a horse. Have you got one I can take, Chappell?"

"There's a string of six in the stable. Take your pick. Any one of them will carry you on a long, fast trail, Jim. Take your pick, an' welcome."

Farrell hardly paused after swinging from his spent horse. He turned and with a lithe stride, ran swiftly. And he had thrown the saddle on a lean, long-legged roan and was drawing up the cinch when Sue Chappell stepped through the stable door and stood beside him.

"Jim! What happened?" she said, her voice held calm by an effort. "What happened in Lonesome?"

"It was nothin', Sue," said Farrell, working swiftly at the cinch and the straps. "Don't you go an' start worryin' about it. Everything's gonna turn out right in the end."

"Jim! You've done something that's forced you into running. Tell me if that isn't true!"

"Runnin'?" said Farrell, with a hard, short laugh. "Mebbe—but I'm not gonna run very far."

"Did you—did you set the law against you, Jim? Is that it? Are you running from the law?"

"From the law?" repeated Farrell, leading the horse from the stall, fully saddled and ready to ride. "That's true, girl. But what kind of law is it that Sheriff Daly has got around him? Is it a law that's gonna give a man a square break? Is it a law that gives each man the same chance? I reckon not, Sue. An' so don't you worry none about this bit of trouble."

"But still it's the law," said she. "And it means that from now on you'll be riding and fighting and hiding. Every minute your life will be in danger. Oh, Jim, can't you see the mistake of it all?"

"I can see the mistake of havin' a law that's no straighter than this we've got. But now there's no time for such talkin', Sue. I'll be seein' you again before long."

He led the horse from the stable and swinging lightly into the saddle, turned it away from the house and toward the distant slope of the valley. And with a heavy heart of dread, the girl stood there and watched him go. It seemed to her in that moment that a great change had taken place and that Jim Farrell was riding out of her life forever.

But Farrell did not ride far. He had gone only a quarter mile or so and was picking his way up a brushy hillside, when he drew in his mount to listen. And then he plainly heard the thudding of many horses' hoofs coming down the road from town. Below him he could see the blinking lights of the Chappell home. He heard the horsemen come up to the ranchhouse and there they stopped.

For five minutes or more no sound reached him from below. Then, again, he heard the horsemen and this time they were headed back for Lonesome. He waited there in the thicket for some minutes longer and then, with a grim smile of humor upon his bronzed face, he turned and rode back down the hillside toward the ranchhouse.

He found a great silence hanging about it, almost as if it was deserted. And he had dismounted at the rear and slipped along the shadowed wall to the front before he saw the girl standing in the yard. She was standing there silently, her head lowered dejectedly. He smiled slowly at the picture she made. She had not heard him approaching along the wall of the house.

"Sue," he called gently.

She whirled about with a smothered gasp. And her eyes picked him out of the shadow at once.

"Oh, Jim! It's happened," she cried faintly.

"What's happened?" said Farrell, with a faint frown.

"They've taken dad!" she cried. "They said it was for giving you a horse and helping you to escape. What will they do with him? What *can* they do with him?"

"Who was it?" asked Farrell, tersely.

"Sheriff Daly and some of his men. Channing—Channing was with them. Oh, what will they do with him?"

"I dunno, Sue. You go in the house an' lock all the doors an' windows. Don't answer to no one. I'll see what I can do about this."

HE RAN for his horse, and whirling about, sent it racing straight down the floor of the valley. He cut across open fields, taking a pair of fences that were enough to tax even the skill of a jumper. But the gallant horse never faltered. As if on the very wings of the air itself it flashed the ground behind them. It took him skimming past the point of the road which the townsmen had not yet reached on their return trip. And there Farrell turned to the right and swung down in a nest of boulders by the roadside. He jerked his rifle from its scabbard.

And a minute or two later they came in sight. They were riding,

slowly, the band of five with Chappell in their midst, and they were coming down the center of the dusty road with never a glance to either side. He waited patiently for them to come opposite and then, raising the rifle, he pressed the trigger.

The crack of the rifle split the silence of the night with such sudden unexpectedness that the horse of the oncoming riders reared and plunged about in confusion. The hat was jerked neatly from the head of Sheriff Daly. He tugged backward on the reins. Then the cold voice of Farrell followed:

"All right, you gents. Hold your peace. An' keep your hands empty or mebbe I'll have to use this rifle again."

"Who're you?" shouted Daly. "Feller, d'you know this is the law you're stoppin'?"

"Right. I know it pretty well," smiled Farrell. "But can't you guess who I am? Well, I won't keep you wonderin'. I'm Farrell an' I'm wantin' to ask you why you've got Chappell along with you."

"Farrell!" cried the sheriff. "It's you again? You aimin' to add another murder to your list? Well, you come outta there. You come out an' give yourself up afore I send in my men after you."

"If I was you, I'd think on that again, before I did it," said Farrell, grimly. "I could stop a pretty good number of men before they reached me. But I'm askin' again, why have you got Chappell?"

"He's goin' to jail," snarled Daly. "He's gonna keep a cell all nice an' warm for you when we get you, Farrell. An' we're gonna do that in time!"

"You want me pretty bad, do you, Daly?"

"Bad enough to trail you clean to hell, if I gotta do that!"

"Then mebbe I can strike a bargain with you. Mebbe I could make it easy for you."

"What d'you mean?" growled the sheriff.

"I was thinkin' that mebbe you'd like to trade me for Chappell. Mebbe you'd let Chappell go if I came out an' gave myself up."

"You mean that, Farrell? You'd do it?"

"I'd do it. But first, you turn Chappell loose."

"I'll do it. I'll even send a man back with him to see that he gets home all right. Now throw down your guns an' come out. I've given my word on it. Chappell goes free."

In the West a man's word is his honor. And not for an instant did Farrell doubt the sheriff. He stepped out into the road and handed over his weapons. Then Daly turned about.

"Rockford! Take Chappel back. An' you two," he turned to a pair of his men, "go on into town. We won't be needin' you any more. Channing an' me can take care of the kid, I reckon. We'll bring him into Lonesome all right."

But the three were hardly alone when the manner of Sheriff Daly changed. He came before Farrell and sneered roughly.

"We can take care of you, me an' Channing. Can't we, chief. An' you thought you was goin' back to Lonesome?" He laughed jarringly, but when he saw the hands of Farrell slowly ball into fists, he sobered. "Take a look up there at the chief. Take a good look at the gun he's holdin' on you. An' now d'you want to start something?"

And a few minutes later, with Farrell bound helplessly in the saddle, Channing and Daly started. But they did not head for town. They turned instead off toward the westward slope.

Three miles passed behind them before the two stopped their horses. Farrell was dumped from his horse and dragged roughly to a big, rugged rock. A rope was passed around it and a few moments later Farrell found himself bound tightly against its jagged side. He watched the two in silence. Not once had he spoken

since they had taken him a prisoner. He saw the moonlight reflect from the face of Channing, showing all of its cruel lines. He could expect no whit of mercy from that outlaw. He smiled at the grim humor of his position and visioned himself meeting the death that Sue Chappell had feared.

"Mebbe by now you can see what a fool you've been for stickin' your nose in our business," said Channing, viciously. "By gravy! It almost makes me laugh to see the way some men will act. Did you think you could stand against me an' get away with it. Did you think you could win in a game with me? Lemme tell you something. My word is the law of this country. If I want a man out of it, I take him out. An' I decided I didn't want you around the valley any longer."

Jim Farrell did not answer. He stared at the lean, hard face of the man before him and smiled with a twist of his lips.

"It's nice an' cool here tonight," the outlaw continued. "Tomorrow it'll be a furnace. Don't worry. When the sun comes up, it will thaw the chill out of your bones. Mebbe it will bring you company. Who knows? There's a den of snakes under that rock. They'll come out in the heat of the day. An' there's coyotes, maybe a wolf. You want to treat them nice. They're gonna be a lotta comfort to you."

Still Farrell did not answer, but the smile was gone from his face.

"Mebbe you'll try to break out of the ropes. It wouldn't be a good idea. The rock is only waiting for a bit of a tug to pull it over. It's a balanced rock, you see. Be careful, Farrell, or you'll have it on top of you. An' if that happens, there won't be anybody ever find you. Mebbe now you see what a fool you are. Well, we'll be on our way. I'm hoping you won't be lonesome. You're only about three miles from town, but you might as well be fifty. Nobody ever comes through here. It's the hottest hole in the country."

With a single hard and jarring laugh, the outlaw swung onto his horse and then the two disappeared into the moonlight that swathed the sandy, hollow slope. Farrell listened to the silence of the night.

Then he twisted his head and looked at the huge rock to which he was tied. As he leaned against it, it wavered slightly, almost as if it was undecided whether it should roll upon him or keep its balance. But then it settled back into place.

The thongs around his wrists were so tight that he could hardly move his fingers. They had tied him well. His guns had been left in their holsters. The fiendish brain of the outlaw leader had intended them for a tantalization, knowing he could not reach them. He leaned to the side. The rock trembled, but the rope around it slipped over the jagged edge of a corner. Suddenly he saw the chance of escape. The odds were high against him, yet he might cut the rope before the rock crashed over. If he waited, he was sure to lose.

So with a grim smile upon his lips, he began to weave slowly from side to side, raking the rope across the sharp corner. At every twist of his body the rock trembled with a growing motion, not to the side, but straight toward him. From beneath it came a confused jumble of noises. The sandy earth sagged. Small stones rolled away. The sound of the rattles came in a singing, hissing whir. They were growing dangerous, yet Farrell worked on. He knew that to stop might end in failure, for the swinging of the rock could not be altered without causing it to topple. A few strands of the rope had parted. It held against him looser. He worked desperately, seeing nothing but failure ahead. Suddenly the rock paused in its backward swing, as if to gather its forces. He knew then that when it came toward him on its rebound, it would crash. He seemed to feel it

from the way the ton of rock hesitated; and he sawed viciously on the rope. It parted suddenly, but his tugging speeded the return of the rock. It hurtled toward him, towering high overhead, moving with incredible speed. Farrell dived head first from its path. He landed with a crash upon his shoulder, twisted and rolled a few feet farther. Sand was hurled into his face. He felt a heavy jar of the ground. The huge rock had fallen with a thud a scant two feet from where he had stopped rolling. He lay there helplessly bound.

Somehow, he gained his knees. By bending backward he could lower his hands until they reached the ropes around ankles and he set to work with his numbed fingers. At last the knots parted. He gained his feet stiffly and staggered away from that singing drone within the pit. It was a simple matter to free his hands. He found another rock and sawed the rope against a sharp corner. The sharp edge of it tore at his wrists, but he did not pause. One by one the strands fell away and a short half-hour after the men had left him, he was headed back toward Chappell's ranchhouse.

CHAPTER V

THE AVENGER

THE girl saw him coming. She had darkened all of the rooms of the house and was standing with her face pressed against the pane of a front window, anxiously watching the road. And suddenly she saw a man run into the open moonlit stretch of the yard. She recognized him at once as Farrell and she rushed out of the house to meet him.

"Jim! Jim!" she cried. "Did anything happen? Did you see him?"

He caught her by the arms and peered down into her anxious, worried face.

"What's this, Sue? Who d'you mean did I see?"

"Why, dad! What did they do to him? Where did they take him?"

"Sue! D'you mean Chappell ain't here? He didn't come back?" Suddenly he realized what had happened and his face lined with a grim purpose.

"He hasn't come back," she said. "Jim! Look at your wrists. What happened?"

"It's nothin'," said he. "You go back in the house now. I got work ahead an' there ain't much time to do it in. I reckon I know where they took your dad. I'll get him, Sue. An' I'll pay the score off at the same time!"

He saddled another horse and he headed directly toward Lonesome with all the speed it could muster. The passage of a quarter of an hour found him dismounting in the shadows at the rear of Wolf's Saloon. He knew that if anywhere in Lonesome, he would find his enemies here. And again his guess told him right.

Silently, slowly, an inch at a time he opened the rear door enough to slip through into the shadowed corner at the back of the barroom. And he stood there unseen and let his eyes rove slowly over the room. Here he was in the very room with a score or more of men and each one of them could be classed as an enemy. But he only smiled at the thought of his danger and let his eyes pass on around the room. Then he saw one of them. There was Rockford, the man Daly had sent back with Chappell. There was the very man he sought. He was sitting alone at a table in a shadowy, rear corner, with his head sunken upon his chest.

Silently, Farrell slipped along the back wall to the corner. Unnoticed by any man in the room, he dropped into a chair on the opposite side of the table and even then Rockford did not look up. He only growled an order in a deep, gruff voice.

"Clear out, you. This here table

is taken an' I don't want no company."

"Rockford," said Farrell, smiling. "Don't you know me, man? Well, you'd better take a look, I reckon."

At that Rockford looked up and then he jerked backward in his chair, his face blanching.

"Farrell!" he choked, hoarsely.

"Right; it's me," said Farrell, grimly. "Now tell me where you took Chappell."

"You go to hell!" snarled Rockford.

And he leaped backward from the table, his hand flashing downward as his chair crashed to the floor behind him. Farrell did not stand completely from his chair. He leaned in a half-crouched position, sliding his chair from under him with the same flashing movement that brought up his gun from its holster. And another of Channing's men paid for his outlawry with his life. The man failed, even, to clear his gun from the holster. Death leaped upon him with terrible swiftness from the forty-five in Farrell's fist. He stood up and sheathed his smoking weapon.

No more than three seconds had passed since that one crashing shot. The smoke still drifted over the table. From the crowd that had leaped out of the path of danger stepped a huge, heavy-shouldered man. Farrell did not see him. He still stared at the motionless figure on the floor beside the table. The big man stepped from the crowd into the cleared center of the floor. His hand jerked forward and a flash of white leaped across the room. Farrell whirled at the sound, as the long-bladed knife buried its point an inch deep in the edge of the table and stuck there, the thin steel humming as it quivered.

Jim Farrell faced him. He saw that the man carried no guns, but that another long-bladed knife was in his belt. Farrell eyed him quietly, then smiled.

"We've met before—Grossman," he said. "But I didn't know that you was another one of them. An' a knifer!"

The crowd seemed only then to realize that this was Jim Farrell before them, for they surged forward and an angry sound ran through their ranks. But then an unexpected thing stopped them. And a very decisive thing it was, indeed.

"Hey, you!" balled a heavy and commanding voice from the rear. They whirled about and saw Wolf, the bartender, standing behind his bar with a pair of heavy Colts resting upon it. His small eyes were filmed with anger. "The lot of you are going to leave Farrell be. If he wants to fight Grossman, that's all right. But you're going to stand back and watch it. Farrell showed me tonight that he was a square-shooter and now I'm returning it. I'll drop the first man that lays a hand on his gun. Do you understand me? All right, Farrell. You'll have a fair chance. I'll watch them!"

Jim Farrell smiled. Leaping, he smashed his fist with crashing force full into the heavy face of Grossman. A table and a chair crashed behind him as he lurched against them. Grossman whipped out his second knife and staggered forward.

For ten minutes the men in Wolf's Saloon saw the strangest fight of their lives. They saw the slender, muscled youth weave in, his fists finding their target with every blow. They saw the big man keep coming back, his knife upraised and ready. Three times it had been reddened by the blood of his opponent and each time he had been felled by those driving fists of Farrell. Grossman could not find a true target. It seemed that he was reaching for a ray of flashing light. And with the lithe spring of a tiger Farrell went to meet him—slipped low beneath his guard—stepped around him—battered him down. Another man would not have regained his feet, but the bull strength of Grossman kept forcing him up. His face was smeared with blood. His left eye was closing.

Farrell stepped aside from a head-

long rush and straightened the big man with a hard driven right. Grossman reeled backward. He tripped over a fallen chair and crashed into the corner where the body of his companion lay. The heavy revolver that had fallen from the holster of the dead man touched his elbow as he slid beneath the table. He stared at it for a moment, dully. Then with a broken curse he clutched the weapon and turned it upon his opponent.

Farrell was ready. He had seen the gun at Grossman's elbow. He knew what would happen. Grossman did not press the trigger. Farrell's hand, stiffened and swollen from his punches, was slow—painfully slow. His gun crept up with only sheer will guiding it. Flame belched from its muzzle—met a fraction of a second too soon. The gun dropped from Grossman's clutching hand. He struggled to his knees—wavered and fell heavily at the side of his dead companion.

Jim Farrell said not a word. He glanced once around the room and then turning, he holstered his weapon and strode silently out of the saloon. He did not have to wonder what was left before him. There was Channing and Daly yet to deal with. He knew that he would more than likely find the two at Channing's house; and with them, perhaps, would be Chappell.

Walking with an easy stride, he entered the grove of trees at the edge of the town. The bare earth of the trail made his footsteps as silent as the falling of a shadow; and Farrell went swiftly along. The trail was narrow. The shadows were large and black around him. Suddenly he stopped. He saw nothing—heard no sound. He did not know what it was that warned him, but even then that warning came too late.

He saw the flashing tongue of flame that leaped out of the darkness ahead. The heavy report of a Colt crashed in his ears. He felt the searing pain of hot lead tear through his left shoulder. Then he saw the dark outline of a man before him in the trail.

Jim Farrell leaped forward. His gun flashed in his hand and in that moment the night was split by the roaring of heavy revolvers and the leaping flashes of flame. Farrell saw the man in the trail sprawl forward. But his gun was not silenced. He crouched there on one knee, his gun spitting its deadly fire. Another white hot hand licked at Farrell. He felt the bullet tear through his thigh, but he stood there as unmovable as the great firs around him and twice more his bullets found their mark.

Suddenly, another gun joined the turmoil. Its flames leaped from the side of the trail, nearer to Farrell. Yet he took careful aim at the man before him and pressed the trigger. The man slid forward upon his face; his gun silenced forever. But the fight for Jim Farrell had only started. His left arm hung uselessly at his side. His right leg was stiff. He dropped his empty gun and jerked the second from his left holster. Then he stepped forward. Here was the end of the trail. Here was Channing before him. The outlaw had leaped from the side into the center of the trail. His gun was roaring like the steady clapping of thunder. But that stream of lead went unheeded by Jim Farrell. In the spitful flashing of that gun, he saw the ugly face of Channing before him. He staggered as a bullet knocked at his left leg. He sagged to one knee. The outlaw advanced with a snarl. He saw his victory almost won.

A bullet plowed a furrow across Farrell's scalp. He felt darkness sweeping upon him. A vague sensation told him that he was falling; that this was the end. He fought the darkness off. With his last strength, he struggled to bring his gun up. His arm ached with the weight of it. Channing was leaping toward him; looming over him. A flash of flame was reaching out before him. Farrell pressed the trigger—saw the man

rush on and knew that he had failed. With one last effort, he steadied his wavering hand—heard the hammer click on an empty chamber and slumped loosely upon his face in the dust of the path.

It seemed to him that he was resting easily. A great crowd milled around him in the darkness of the fir grove. But he paid them no attention. Soft arms cushioned his head. A soft voice spoke in his ear. Sue Chappell.

"Jim! Jim! Are you going to be all right?" she whispered, tensely.

Jim opened his eyes. "I'm all right now," he muttered. "But where is Chappell? Is he safe?"

"Yes. They had dad in the house. Channing was trying to force him into giving me up to him. But they're all gone now and everything is ended. You got Channing with your last bullet. And now even the town is for you. Jim," she said softly, "now we can go on with our planning."

"Right, Sue," smiled Jim, "an' that ranch of mine will be a good place to start."

Another Les Rivers yarn

in the

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—: Also :—

A Smashing six-gun cow-country adventure

THE FEUD KILLERS

By T. W. Ford

Watch for December WESTERN TRAILS
Out November 1st

The Big December Roundup!

BERT LITTLE

and the

BRANDED SPURS

By Clyde A. Warden

That silver spur with its mysterious jumble of letters started Bert Little on a strange quest. Up from the Texas Border into the cattle country, he searched for its girl owner!

—Also—

THE FEUD KILLERS

By T. W. Ford

Long Lee was now the last of the Bakers. And the cold-eyed gent across the newly-crimsoned waters of Blood Creek—was the last of the rival clan!

and a tophand string of yarns by—

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December WESTERN TRAILS—Out Nov. 1st

Do you want a PEN PARD?

Here are some lonely hombres and hombresses who are looking for a writing pal.

AN' A SAXOPHONE PLAYER TO BOOT—that's John "Whitey" Miskey. He's blond, five feet six, is an athlete, plays in orchestra, and is fifteen years old. Whitey wants some of WESTERN TRAILS' hombresses who are crazy to write to sling some letters his way. Address: JOHN "WHITEY" MISKEY, *507 Willett Street, Buffalo, N. Y.*

YOUNG HOMBRESS with wavy golden hair is lonesome and would like to have some **Pen Pards.** She is five feet seven, weighs 130, and has big gray eyes. She likes WESTERN TRAILS fine. Address: MISS EULA JOHNSON, *1109 N. 46th Street, R. 1, Box 422 B, Ft. Smith, Ark.*

WEST VIRGINIA LAD would like to have some **Pen Pards.** He is five feet ten, weighs 160, has blue eyes, and is twenty-one years old. He likes all outdoor sports. Will exchange snapshots with all hombresses who care to write. Address: CHARLIE ATKINS, *Looneyville, W. Virginia.*

LONELY WIDOW of twenty-one would like **Pen Pards**—both girls and boys. She is five feet two inches, and weighs 109 lbs. She is a blonde with blue eyes. And has a little son two years old. Will answer all letters. Address: MRS. HATTIE MAE SIMPSON, *Monticello, Ark.*

COWBOY-SOLDIER-WANDERER is on the lookout for **Pen Pards.** He was a cowboy before the war. Then he joined up with Uncle Sam until 1919. From then on he has covered every state in the Union. He is thirty-five years old, is six feet one inch tall, weighs 204 lbs., has light hair and blue eyes. He promises to answer all letters from WESTERN TRAILS' hombres and hombresses. Address: O. J. CAMPBELL, *Harrisburg, Va.*

THIS HOMBRESS wants action *pronto!* She says, "Please tell the folks to rope a pen and sling some ink—and write to me right *pronto!*" Daphne is her name, but she doesn't describe herself. Plumb mysterious, she is. Address: DAPHNE LEE, *Hancock, Mo.*

KID BLACKIE is this jasper's brand. He's spent three years in Australia and will answer questions about it to the hombres and hombresses who write. He promises to answer all letters. Address: NICK GILUSICK, *"Kid Blackie", 3724 Folsom Street, Los Angeles, Calif.*

BILL here is a soldier in the Foreign Service, and expects to leave for Hawaii right soon. He is twenty-four, and can send some interesting pictures to anyone who cares to write. He was raised on a ranch and went to University of Southern California. Will answer all letters. Address: WILLIAM DAVIS, *Engineer Corps, Fort McDowell, Calif.*

HOMBRE would like letters from cowboys. He is eighteen years old, and five feet seven inches tall. He is tired of the city and has a yen for the open spaces. Address: JOSEPH STRACKA, *182 Samuels Ave., Hazelton, Pa.*

Fowl Play

Latest "Walrus and Wishbone" Laugh

"Ride right by, dang it!" growled Walrus.

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Up Pops the Deputy," etc.

Walrus and Wishbone were corralled by a mighty slick jasper. They were to beat his racing chickens—or stretch hemp on a cottonwood limb. Wishbone decided to enter two hawgs against the chickens—an' made a strange wager.

"YEP, dang it," orated Wishbone Watters as he shoved out a horny hand toward Walrus, "it's a bargain!"

After a hard day in the saddle the itinerant waddies had pitched camp in an arroyo and were cooking the evening meal over an odoriferous greasewood fire. While the bacon sizzled and the battered coffee pot perked, the ill assorted pair of cowpokes rounded up their faults for analysis and came to the conclusion that their shortcomings had been responsible for their precarious status in the scheme of things.

"Shore," grinned Walrus as he made an attempt to drown a firebug in midair with a stream of plug tobacco juice, "I'm plumb glad t'shake. Waal, I admits yuh've showed some sense fer oncet, Wishbone, yuh li'l hunk of polecat meat. Horse sense is what we been throwin' away. If a hombre don't keep that, he shud take a hunk of sourdough, a jug of red-eye an' pilgrim to the timber whar he won't bother no self-respeckin' jasper with his igorance. Yep!"

"That's it, by cripesamighty!" enthused Wishbone. "We sw'ars to keep outa trouble and shie from any heeooman that w'ars a bonnet an' a calico skirt, excetery. Mebbe we shud oughta

go to work an' live a useful life an'—"

"Waal, yuh li'l galoot!" bellowed his partner. "Yuh're goin' too fer. Work, huh? Like hell! That wa'n't in the bargin an' danged if—"

"I said 'mebbe,' didn't I, yuh ol' crowbait," interposed Wishbone with a broad grin. "Reckon we'd jest dry up like a pertater skin if we didn't keep movin'. It's like I heerd a sky pilot orate oncet over a jasper what figgered it was easier an' cheaper t' raise cows 'thout a ranch than with one. He says: 'Hombre which is born o' woman hath but a short time to live an' is fulla mis'ry. He comeseth up an' is cut down like a flower an' then fleeseth like a shadder an' never continueth in one wickiup, nope!' "

"Reckon the heat has shore scorched yore haid," scoffed Walrus. "Yuh talk like a gent what has bedded down in a loco lodge. Waal, pick up that danged fryin' pan afore that hawg meat jest natchelly evap'rates. Hawse sense, huh! I giss no hombre what has brains like a goat kin think like a hawse, nope."

"If I didn't jest turn over a new leaf," retorted the bowlegged waddy, reaching for the coffee pot, "I'd plug yuh one in the snoot, but danged if I don't love ev'rythin' in the hull world at this minit, even dumb animiles. Cripesamighty, yuh skinny gyraffe, jest think; no more shemales! No more jails! We'll be two Gawd-fearin' critters an'—"

"Gimme some hawg meat, yuh li'l sidewinder an' shet yore grub-shoot!" yipped Walrus. From the shadows came a prolonged neigh. "Haw!" guffawed the skinny cowpoke, "even the hawses is laffin'."

The evening meal was masticated in unusual silence. A nimbus of peace, it seemed, had at last strayed over the sun-beaten pates of Wishbone and Walrus and there it grazed while the wanderers snored and coyotes howled. The night gathered up its frayed black skirts and fled. A new day yawned, opened its eyes and stared at the sleepers with a cherubic, sunny visage. Wishbone blinked and opened his orbs. With a yell he scrambled to his feet and kicked Walrus in the ribs.

"Git up, dang yuh!" he howled. "We're a couple of new-bawn hombres."

"Yuh'll be a daid one if yuh don't look out, yuh whangdoodle!" threatened Walrus as he maneuvered to all fours. "New hombres, huh? Waal, that means we ain't never had a drink. Le's pilgrim an' git one."

"Da-a-a-ang!" exclaimed the little man. "Yuh've got hawse sense already. Whar's them broncs?"

Looking at the slashed and bumpy panorama before them through rose-colored glasses and imbued with a double injection of reform, Wishbone Watters and Walrus McGonigle loped along the trail. The hard saddles beneath the two seemed to have resolved themselves into luxurious pillows. Even the buzzards overhead looked like birds of paradise. And Walrus talked baby talk to a rattlesnake as it slithered from the lee of a rock and whirred at him.

FOR three hours the cowpokes rode onward and naturally had to arrive some place eventually. Pulling up their sweating steeds after sliding down a steep incline to a rutted, dusty road, the cowpokes perused a weather-beaten board sign that hung drunkenly from a tree.

PAUSE, WEARY TRAVELER AND REST IN UTOPIA. TWO MILES YONDER

"Sounds plumb eleegant an' hawspitible," commented Wishbone. "Reckon we'll ride on an' pause, huh?"

"Shore," agreed Walrus, forgetting to argue, and the little man had to grab leather to keep from falling off his horse. "Yootopia," breathed the elongated waddy as he forked his bronc. "Read about that place afore. It's whar a hombre gits a heaven 'thout havin' to cash in to do it. Waal,

I giss that's whar we pitch our wicki-up. On, weary pilgrims, on!"

Wishbone eyed his partner dubiously, then some loco weed growing beside the trail. Reform working on an hombre, he mused, might forget when to stop.

Clippity-clop! Clippity-clop! Clippity-cl— "Whoa!"

The command to dumb animals was a duet. Walrus' eyes bulged and his chew suddenly seemed to ferment. Up ahead was a rock which was nothing unusual. But atop said rock sat a female of the species, resplendent in a beribboned white frock. The mass of golden hair partly hid a perfect profile. King Sol streamed down and wove a silvery, gossamer-like halo about the glorious wealth of hair and playful zephyrs rumpled it with invisible fingers.

"Cripesamighty!" groaned Walrus. "Giddap!" He turned quickly to Wishbone as his horse responded. "Don't look at the danged critter," he snapped. "Pilgrim right by!"

"Sh-Shore," responded Wishbone like a man talking under ether. "Shore—" However, his eyes were not on speaking terms with his brain. They disregarded caution and feasted themselves on the delectable vision of pulchritude sitting, seemingly rather disconsolate, and tracing a pattern in the dust of the road with a long stick. And then Wishbone rode abreast of the rock and looked smack-dab into a pair of eyes that wrung every resolution of the night before from his abbreviated frame. To make matters worse, the mesmeric orbs were filmed with glistening tears. Wishbone's steed stopped short and a grin appeared to spread over its equine countenance. Having run the gauntlet, Walrus turned in his saddle and began to swear and wave his arms.

"C'mon, yuh danged li'l coyote," he howled. "Yuh ornery, bowlaiged gopher. Y-Yuh—!" And the skinny man whipped off his hat and slammed it into the dirt. "Dang yuh!" he roared. "Shemales agin! Git back on that hawse or I'll start shootin'. I'll—"

BUT apparently Wishbone was oblivious to his partner's eruption. He walked timidly toward the rock, removed his hat and bowed gallantly. "Beggin' yore pardon, ma'am," he began, "yuh look like yuh was in trouble an' a Watters never deserts a gal in distress, nope!"

"Hell!" reiterated Walrus and slipped off his horse. A gun in each hand, he stamped back over the road.

"Oh-h," squealed the girl as she slipped from the rock. "I think your friend is drunk. I'm afraid he—"

"Haw!" laughed Wishbone. "Nope. He's harmless, ma'am. When he wuz a year ol' he crawled out inta the yard an' a calf stepped on his haid."

"Dang yuh!" barked the skinny waddy. "Yuh let that gal be an' git on your hawse or, by judasamighty, I'll—er—ah—gulp!" Walrus' feet argued over the right of way. His mouth widened and became a big round O beneath his hirsute handlebars. Involuntarily his hand went up and yanked off his battered hat.

"Da-a-a-a-ang!" he mumbled. "Beg yore pardon, ma'am. If yuh need help, I reckon yuh would want a he-man, huh? This li'l runover, moth-chewed polecat ain't fitten to address sech a beeootiful gal. Now—"

"W-Well," smiled the girl, "this is very chivalrous of you both. But I'm afraid you can't help us. We—"

"We?" gasped Wishbone, looking wildly around. "Whar—?"

"My father and I," explained the girl, her pretty countenance falling again. "Y-You see he's the sheriff of Utopia and—but this is no concern of yours and I must go now. It isn't proper for me to be talking to strangers and—"

"Wishbone Watters, at yore service, ma'am," hastily the little man introduced himself. "An' I reckon we ain't strangers as we're agoin' to graze fer a spell in yore fa'r city an'—"

"Walrus McGonigle, ma'am," put

in the skinny waddy. "Thet's me. A gardeen of the gentle sex, ma'am. Now if any gent has been doin' yuh dirt, I'll have 'im in Boot Hill afore sundown. I—"

The girl laughed. "It is not anything like that," she said. "You see, my father and I might have to leave Utopia and go back to California, and I love it here so. I—" Her voice failed her and the twin pools of sapphire hue became dewy. Wishbone's heartstrings twanged. Walrus' Adam's Apple began to hop up and down and he indulged in a series of prodigious swallows.

"You see," the girl proceeded, "they're not going to elect my father sheriff again unless he stops all of the robberies that's been going on around Utopia and as he only has another week, well, I guess there isn't any hope. And he is a good sheriff!" the girl burst out. "But most of the town is against him because he's honest. It's that mean, crooked gambler, Faro Jack Sells, who's to blame. He wants to be sheriff and run the town and then Utopia will be a place that God-fearing citizens will shun and—and—"

"Ma'am," orated Wishbone, assuming a dramatic pose, "we're gents of destiny. Reckon yuh was herded to this danged rock by the cowpokes of Providence, if they have same. Me an' my pard pilgrims forth to join your pa, yep. We—"

"Yuh danged idjut!" whispered Walrus angrily. "Yuh swore las' night that yuh wouldn'—"

"This is t'day," replied Wishbone, "an' would yuh see Yootopia an' this li'l gal lef' to the mercy of a tinhorn gambler? Nope! A thousan' times nope! Ma'am," Wishbone bowed low again, "if yuh'll axcept my hawse, we'll excort yuh inta—"

"Thank you," said the girl, her cheeks tinted a rich pink, "but I came out to gather some wild flowers and I haven't even begun. I don't know how to thank you and I know my father will be more than grateful. His name is Gates. I'm Myrtle Gates. And I'm inviting you both to supper tonight." She moved away and seemed to float over the terrain. She waved a little hand to the waddies as she rounded a big rock.

"Da-a-a-a-a-ang!" breathed Wishbone and waved in response. Walrus absently jettisoned his chew and bit a hunk out of the brim of his hat. Reason returned as his palate protested against the unsavory flavor of alkali dust on old felt. Hastily spiting it out, the skinny man jumped up and down until a big dust cloud enveloped the immediate vicinity and sent the horses into paroxysms of coughing. Walrus ceased jumping and groped through the dust toward Wishbone.

"Still loco, huh?" he yipped. "Goin' into Yootopia to help a sheriff! Waal, *adios*, an' I hopes yuh like the jail. I'm pilgrimin'."

IF HE heard, Wishbone did not betray the fact. "Supper," he mumbled, "supper at a table with a cloth on it an' sittin' with that beeootiful shemale. Da-a-a-ang! Yootopia shore was named right. It has got a angel an'—"

"Yuh hear me, yuh li'l wart?" raved Walrus. "Right now we has come to the partin' of the ways. *Adios*, an' I ain't foolin'."

"*Adios!*" drawled Wishbone without batting an eye and climbed into his saddle. Madder than a March hare with gout, Walrus stood in the road and stared after him. Finally he swore some more, swung up to his own saddle, reined the horse around and rode in the opposite direction.

"I'll show the li'l varmint," he growled. "When a McGonigle sees the error of his ways, he don't back up an'—" The horse stopped and snorted. Beside the road stood Myrtle Gates and she was appraising the skinny rider accusingly.

"Oh, you've changed your mind, I see!" she said. "Well, I don't blame you. It isn't a healthy town for any-

thing but strong, courageous men." Her carmine lips curled and her pretty eyes flashed with scorn. "And Mister Watters has kept on and he's only half your size. I knew he would. He—"

"Huh?" snapped Walrus angrily. "Yuh mean that that li'l gopher has got more nerve than me? Waal, ma'am, I have shot hombres fer sayin' less'n that. An' I'll show yuh—er—anyways I wuz only comin' back lookin' fer a saddle bag I lost!" And his mustaches bristling indignantly, Walrus swung his mount around and forked it at top speed in the wake of Wishbone.

The little man was riding into the main street of Utopia when Walrus overtook him. He simply glanced at his partner and grinned, then stabbed a finger toward a fat citizen who sat on the edge of a watering trough. The hombre was diligently whittling at a shingle with a knife. A ray from the sun pointed out a piece of metal attached to the whittler's vest.

"That must be the sheriff," announced Walrus. "Danged if he looks enterprisin'. Waal, I giss he's plumb discouraged an'—"

"Yep," agreed Wishbone and then rode to the trough. The Utopian looked up as the waddies dismounted. He had a full-moon face that was never meant to throw terror into the heart of the most timid outlaw. His mouth was completely hidden by a mustache which had been allowed to grow wild.

"Howdy," ventured the little cowpoke. "Reckon yuh're the sheriff, huh? Sheriff Gates? Waal we met yore datter down the road—"

The man's face brightened. "Shore," he grinned. "Don't yuh see my star?"

"Dang!" exclaimed Walrus. "A blin' man cud see it. Reckon yuh'll have a drink on us, mebbe?"

THE man dropped the shingle with alacrity and was on his feet before Walrus had finished speaking. "Shore!" he agreed. The waddies exchanged glances and the thought occurred to both that it is unfortunate that offspring are unable to choose their parents. Be that as it may, the waddies were ushered by the doubtful limb of the law into the Knave of Spades Saloon, while a smattering of humanity draped over the bar, looked up quizzically. A cryptic smile flitted over the faces of some of the townspeople.

"Howdy, sheriff!" greeted a voice, and the waddies turned to see a tall, shifty-eyed, pasty-faced hombre with a carefully cultivated goatee approach. The man was clad in a long black coat which was unbuttoned to display one of the gaudiest vests ever conceived by the ingenuity of sartorial experts. Allying with this to dazzle the eyes of the populace was a big diamond nestling in a black cravat. Two huge bulges at his hips betrayed the presence of an abundance of hardware.

"Howdy, Faro," snickered the sheriff. "Meet my frien's, ah—er—"

"Reckon names don't count none," grinned Wishbone, and shook. The little waddy dropped the hand quickly and thought of the time he had picked up a rotten potato.

"Glad to have yuh in Utopia, gents," smiled the gambler icily. "Aimin' to stop long?"

"All depen's," grinned Walrus, "on the grub an' red-eye yuh sell."

"Haw-w-w!" erupted the sheriff. "Now le's drink!"

The irrigation of their dry gullets attended to, Wishbone and Walrus hastily ushered their new acquaintance out into the open and voiced a desire to speak with him in private. The sheriff nodded as if he understood and led them to a livery stable. Planting himself on a box, the moon-faced man gestured to the waddies to start orating, but not too loud.

"Seems your datter tol' us all the trouble," began Wishbone. "An' she shore would hate to leave Yootopia. Would break her heart, yep. An' me

an' my pard ain't goin' to see that purty gal's heart busted, nope."

"Yuh danged hootin'," affirmed Walrus. "We're here t' help yuh, sheriff, an' throw a hackamore over that greasy hombre, Faro Jack. Now if yuh've gotta idee or—"

"Good!" enthused the sheriff, rubbing his star. "I know whut yuh kin do. Yuh both kin hol' up the stage. Hee-hee! An' I'll git thar jest when yuh git the money an' then you hombres kin drop it an' excape."

Walrus got up from a feed box. "C'mon," he snapped at Wishbone. "I'm pilgrimin'."

"Sit down, yuh locoed totempole," ordered the little man. "We promised the gal an' she stays a promise. We ain't takin' no chances. The sheriff hyar has give his word he'll let us excape an', by cripesamighty, I'm fer 'im!"

"But that'll make us outlaws, yuh danged fool!" argued Walrus, wishing that he had kept on riding when he had a chance.

"Waal, we ain't eggsackly sky pilots right now, yuh skinny galoot," grinned the bowlegged plotter. "They cain't hang us more'n oncet an' anyways the gal will know we did it fer her an' explain when her pa is elecked agin."

"Shore," chimed in the moon-faced sheriff, "when I give the money back that was robbed from the stage, they'll eleck me agin as no money has ever been got back before an'—"

"It's loco, dang it!" argued Walrus, his eyes avidly straying to the distant hills pictured in the frame of the doorway. "But yuh're the sheriff an' that gal's pa an' yore word oughta be good. Waal, when do we hol' up the stage?"

"She comes acrost the crick in a hour," stated the sheriff with glee. "It's right down the road about a mile an' thar is a lot of big rocks yuh kin hide behin'. Don't fergit to wait ontil yuh see me. Then drop the money an' run, sabe?"

"Shore," grinned Wishbone, his mind's eye feasting on a vision that had driven caution to the four winds. Being a martyr for Myrtle was something that did not fall to the lot of every man and Wishbone was already looking forward to riding into Utopia hours later to receive her blessings and perhaps encouragement enough to set him awooing her with might and main. Misgivings rumbling in the region of his diaphragm, Walrus looked to his guns and saw that they were well choked as he followed the enthusiastic sheriff out of the livery stable.

Walrus and Wishbone took pains to ride by the saloon, said *adios* to those gathered in front of the lair of Faro, and opined publicly that they figured on looking over the scenery for a likely looking spot for a wickiup.

"Of all the danged locoed jaspers, yuh're the worser," accused Walrus as they rode out of hearing. "Holdin' up a stage in broad daylight fer a shemale. Hawse sense, haw!"

"Waal, it's oney play-acktin'," retorted Wishbone, "an' I allus wanted tuh see if I cud hol' up a stage like them real outlaws. An' when we're eatin' supper over at the sheriff's tonight, the gal will say how brave we wuz an' mebbe kiss us or somethin' an'—"

"Moonin' agin, huh?" rasped Walrus with utter disgust. "Waal, if them stage drivers start shootin', I fork my bronc an' I don't stop ontil I git to Alasky. An' that sheriff, cripes! He couldn't arrest a snail. I shud think the gal'd be plumb ashamed to say he was her pa. Of all the sheriffs I've seed, bad or worser, he is the winner. Huh!"

"That's all the more reason we has to help the hombre. Gawd's weak critters has got to be perteckted an' we—"

"Aw shet up!" growled Walrus. "Thar's the rocks the sheriff spoke about. Now all we has to do is wait an' rob the stage. Cripesamighty! Waal, I oughta had more sense'n be-

lieve yuh las' night, dang yuh. An' I bet this is another county we'll haveta hide outa if we don't git spaded into it with our boots on. All becuz of a shemale. Dang 'em. Dana-a-ang 'em!"

"When I git ol' an' gits to be a scairt polecat like you," sneered Wishbone as he tied his mount to a tree, "I'm goin' to jest shoot myself an' give the buzzards a picnic." And he bit off a chaw viciously and hunkered down to wait for sounds of the approaching stage.

SOON the shout of an hombre was wafted to them on the hot breeze, followed by a faint crack of a whip and the dull thudding of horses' hoofs on terra firma. Wishbone drew his kerchief up over his homely face and pulled out his guns. Walrus swallowed hard and aped his little partner's every move. From behind them came the whinny of a horse and the crackling of twigs. Walrus essayed a weak grin. The sheriff was on the job.

The stage rattled over the loose boards of the crude bridge spanning the creek. Wishbone leaped from behind a rock and ordered the driver of same and the armed guard who sat next to him to throw their hands toward the sky, punctuating the command with a bullet that broke bits of wood from the old vehicle and provoked squeals of alarm from a pair of passengers. Walrus' guns covered the latter while Wishbone ordered the money, if any, to be tossed to the ground *pronto* lest there be terrible bloodshed. Almost immediately a small wooden box, well padlocked, was tossed into the ditch alongside the road.

"Now pilgrim fast!" growled Wishbone. "An' don't try no—"

"Stick 'em up!" bellowed a voice. "Haw! Haw! Hee! Hee!" Wishbone and Walrus spun on their heels, surprise and sudden dread twisting their guns out of limp fingers. The moon-faced man stood there with a great piece of ancient ordnance in his fists and both barrels of the same ready for business.

"Dang yuh!" raged Wishbone. "Yuh give yore word. Yuh said—"

"I tol' yuh!" yelped Walrus, great beads of sweat rolling down his face as the occupants of the stage shouted in triumph and piled out to seize the robbers. "I knowed thar was somethin' wrong. I knowed—"

"Haw!" guffawed the man with the big star. "Hee! Hee! Some sheriff, ain't I? Tie these ornery outlaws up an' throw 'em in the stage an' we'll take 'em into Yootopia. Hee! Hee!"

Hard objects were shoved into the spinal columns of the cowpokes. Harsh voices bade them drop their artillery and put their hands behind their backs.

"It's oney a joke," protested Wishbone as he felt strong cord encircle his wrists and tighten. "We was playacktin' an'—"

"Shore," argued Walrus, "that danged sheriff—"

"Shet up, yuh coyotes an' git into that stage or we'll put yuh both in daid as fence posts," snarled the stage driver. "Got yuh at last, huh? Waal, they'll be glad to see yuh in Yootopia. Haw! Haw!" He looked at the moon-faced sleuth and laughed again. The guard was also indulging in prolonged mirth.

"Yuh'll laff on t'other side of yore homely mugs," spat Wishbone as he fell head first into the stage and took two square inches of skin off his nose. "When yuh fin' out we're innercent men, yuh'll go fer yore guns, dang yuh, or else—ugh!" The gangly frame of Walrus squashed him to the floor and then the stage rattled on its way. Realizing that further protests were futile, Wishbone and Walrus steeped themselves in woe and hoped that in the next world, to which it seemed certain they were to be ushered, there would be plenty of shemales to be boiled slowly in oil.

UTOPIA'S amazed and indignant populace swarmed about the stage as it pulled up in front of the sheriff's office. Word had come in ahead that the hold-up men had been caught at last. Horny hands reached inside the stage and pulled out Wishbone and Walrus, depositing them none too gently on the ground. The waddies scrambled to their feet as best they could and stared around wildly.

"Whar's the sheriff?" howled the bow-legged man. "Whar—?"

"I'm the sheriff," snapped a tall hombre, separating himself from the crowd, "I—"

Walrus' knees sagged and a funny little sound jerked out of his open mouth. Wishbone rocked back and forth like a rocking chair a person has just left, trying to convince himself that his eyes were a pair of liars. This was not a fat, moon-faced, dumb looking hombre. He was just the opposite, a tall, wiry, smooth-shaven, weather-beaten man with iron gray hair.

"Y-Yuh're the sh-sheriff?" gulped Wishbone. "Sh-Sheriff G-Gates?"

"Shore!" snapped the man. "Who'd yuh think I wuz, Buffalo Bill? So you two ornery coyotes are the hold-up men, huh? Waal—"

"Haw! Hee! Hee!" The moon-faced man stepped out into the clear. Wishbone swore and looked at Gates.

"Who's that hombre?" he demanded. "He said he was you, dang 'im! He—"

The crowd roared. Faro Jack Sells stepped to the sheriff's side and grinned like a wolf. "Haw! Haw!" the gambler laughed. "That's Napoleon Winkley, the town nitwit. Likes to play sheriff, gents, when Gates is away. Haw-w-w-w-w-w!" And Faro Jack followed up his advantage while Wishbone and Walrus wallowed in despair. "Took Winkley to get 'em an' the sheriff's been tryin' fer a year. Haw-w-w-w-w!"

"I kin explain," yelled Wishbone. "We tol' that danged idjut, Winkley, that—"

A feminine cry interrupted the proceedings. Myrtle Gates, cheeks flushed, golden hair breaking loose from its fastenings, stepped into the area of disturbance and stared at the waddies.

"O-Oh," she exclaimed, "you two? Just a pair of stage robbers. I might've known you were lyin' to me. I hope they hang both of you. I hope you—"

"Looka here, ma'am," began Wishbone desperately, "we—"

"That's enough, you ornery cusses," snapped Sheriff Gates. "Git goin' to the calaboose!"

"Hee! Hee!" chuckled the moon-faced man as the two cowpokes walked through the muttering throng. "Some sheriff, ain't I, huh? Haw! Haw!" Myrtle Gates heard and her pretty brows knitted. She looked at the miserable cowpokes, at her father, then back to Napoleon Winkley. Suddenly everything came to light and with a little cry she started running toward home.

WISHBONE and Walrus sat in the Utopia jail and stared at each other for almost an hour before either could summon speech. Walrus got going first.

"Jail agin, yuh li'l whangdoodle," he spat, "an' it's yore fault as ush'al. Hawse sense? Haw-w-w-w-w! We tell a idjut with a tin badge we're agoin' to rob the stage an' he capchers us. Haw-w-w!" There was no mirth in Walrus' harangue.

"Shet up, dang yuh!" roared Wishbone. "Anyways the gal will tell her pa how it happened an' they'll haveta let us go an'—"

"Like hell!" scoffed Walrus. "What chancet would Gates have in the danged town if they found out we wuz jest tryin' to make him look good as a sheriff, huh?"

Wishbone saw the point, aged two years, and lapsed into miserable communion with himself. And then the

door opened and Faro Jack Sells walked in. He pulled up a chair, placed it near the cell bars and grinned at the prisoners.

"Reckon yuh hombres need a lawyer, huh?" he began. "Waal, I'm the oney lawyer in the county an' I kin git yuh outa jail, on bail."

"Bail?" repeated the startled cowpokes in unison. "What in h——?"

"Luker!" elucidated Faro. "Legal tender. We got justice in this town, yep. It's new kinda law that gives a hombre a right to walk 'round free ontil his trial comes up an' yourn is set fer three weeks hence. If yuh git off, the money is give back to yuh, sabe?"

Wishbone jumped up from his seat. "Yuh mean if we pay yuh cash, we gits free?" he asked doubtfully.

"Not eggsackly," came the reply, "yuh cain't leave town but yuh won't haveta stay in jail. How much luker have you hombres got?"

"Five hun'red between us," hastily put in Walrus. "An' it's yourn if yuh ain't a danged liar an'—"

"I'm a lawyer, gents, the only lawyer in the county," said Faro Jack. "I know the law an' what a hombre is entitled to. Fork over the five hundred an' I'll order yore release from the calaboose. He-e-e-e-e-ey! Sheriff!"

Wishbone and Walrus were emptying their pokes when Gates entered. "Unlock the cell, sheriff!" ordered Faro. "These cusses is out on bail an' yuh better have your men spread aroun' the town an' see as they don't git away. Of course, at night they haveta be locked up."

"Waal, I'm holdin' yuh responsible, Faro," snapped Gates as he fumbled with his keys. "If they git away, yuh'll answer t'me, lawyer or no. Alright, you coyotes, step out an' fork over yore bail money to Faro *pronto*."

"Shore," grinned Wishbone and shoved his and Walrus' worldly goods into the hands of the gambler. Faro Jack chuckled, pocketed the money and hurried away.

"Waal," enthused Wishbone, "she's some law in this neck of the woods. Da-a-a-a-ang! Waal, le's go git a drink, Walrus, an'—"

"Jest a minit, gents," drawled the sheriff, "I want to palaver with yuh. Been talkin' to Myrtle an' now I know yuh both are innercent. But yuh ain't got a chance to git outa this hell-hole excep' in a pine box. Nope!"

"H-Huh?" gulped Walrus. "B-But the gal will sw'ar—"

"Reckon no hombre'd believe it," said Gates. "An' yuh don't know Faro Jack Sells. He's fust cousin to a rattler an' more ornery. Bad in heart an' soul. That bail money yuh give 'im. Yuh kin kiss it adios. That's one of his tricks, gents. Gits a prisoner's money an' never gives it back. Don't haveta, seein' as no prisoner ever gits outa Utopia under his own power, nope!"

"Cripesamighty!" moaned Walrus and leaned against the bars for support.

"But yuh're the sheriff," argued Wishbone. "Ain't yuh got no say or—?"

"Danged little," answered the sheriff. "Faro Jack Sells runs the town. He an' his feller coyote, Judge Wares. Yore trial comes off in three weeks, gents. I go out in a week, sabe? An' as new sheriff, Sells will arrest yuh agin an' if yuh cain't fork over another five hun'red, yuh git locked up an' yuh kin figger on stayin' locked up ontil Sells hangs yuh! I'm plumb grateful, gents, fer yuh tryin' t'help Myrtle an' me an', dang it, yuh kin count on me t'help if thar's a way. Yep. Waal, *adios*, an' don't make no fool play an' start runnin' as thar's a dozen hombres outside the town who kin shoot a buzzard's eye with a rifle." And the sheriff turned and left the waddies to their misery.

"My Gawd!" jerked out Walrus. "What a danged mess an' it's all yore fault, yuh li'l coyote. No hawses, no guns, no luker! Cripes! An' we gits locked up in a week fer keeps an' then gits hung. Hawse sense! Even a sheep

would be plumb ashamed of what's inside yore haid!"

"Waal," drawled Wishbone, his brain working fast, "the sheriff said onless'n we had more bail we'd git locked up, sabe? We gotta git that danged bail."

"Mebbe," retorted Walrus with biting sarcasm, "we could fin' a tree an' pluck same from the limbs. Waal, gittin' hung is one way of gittin' rid of yuh!"

WALRUS hied himself to the shade of the livery stable and sat down on an old box. Wishbone found out where Myrtle lived and paid her a visit. The girl was on the verge of tears, tugged nervously at a little square of lace and blamed herself for everything which had transpired. Wishbone Watters forgot all his woe and impending doom as he sat goggle-eyed in a rocking chair and gazed rapturously at the perturbed beauty, an incentive to continue living and breathing for more years to come.

"I will never forgive myself," she reiterated between sniffles. "It'll be as if I myself sent you two brave cavaliers to your destruction. O-h-h!"

"Now, ma'am," put in Wishbone, clearing his throat, "mebbe thar's a way outa this dang' mess. Reckon if Faro is the gambler all these hombres say he is, he ain't goin' to back down if I dast him to bet on somethin', is he huh?"

"Oh, you couldn't beat him," wailed Myrtle. "He always wins."

"Waal, ma'am," continued the little man earnestly, "mebbe Faro has a weakness er somethin', huh? Mebbe thar's one play he figgers he kin allus beat, huh?"

The girl's eyes widened. "Why yes, there is, Mister Watters," she said. "B-But they never lose. Lots of men have tried to beat them but failed."

"Them?" interrogated Wishbone. "Who—?"

"He has three racing roosters," was the girl's astonishing response. "Oh, they can run awfully fast and for two years Faro Jack has challenged anything within reason to beat them. He always wins. Oh, I feel so miserable! I wish I were dead! I—"

"Thar now," soothed Wishbone, getting to his feet, his heart thumping wildly. "Don't worry yore pretty haid. I giss the world'll be better off without a couple of jaspers like me an' Walrus. Anyways we ain't daid yit an' thar's more'n one slip twixt the bottle an' the gullet." He laid a hand softly on the golden hair, recoiled violently with emotion and hurried out into the street.

The Knave of Spades saloon was filled with thirsty mid-afternoon customers when Wishbone and Walrus walked in and stared hopefully at those lining the bar. However, no invitations to irrigate were forthcoming. Utopia, it seemed, was above meeting outlaws socially. The cowpokes licked their lips and sat down at a table. Faro Jack Sells came out of a back room and walked toward them.

"Reckon yuh ain't welcome in my place, gents," he began evilly, his hands at his sides. "Pilgrim *pronto* or—"

"Kinda loud-mouthed, aintcha, Faro?" snapped Wishbone while the onlookers stared and moved out of range. "Reckon I've heerd about them roosters of yourn, sabe?"

"Waal?" demanded Faro. "What about 'em?"

"Think they cain't be beat, huh?" taunted Wishbone. "Waal, if yuh've got spunk enough, I'm willin' tuh lay yuh a bet!"

"Put yore cyards on the table, dang yuh!" howled Faro Jack.

"Shore," grinned the little cowpoke and Walrus groaned. "I'm borrerin' a coupla hawgs to race yore danged roosters," he orated. "Terms as follers, Faro. If yuh win, yuh git the two hawses we got in the stable an' they's danged good nags. Also yuh kin keep the bail money yuh took from us an' we got some more luker cached mebbe forty miles from here, sabe?" Walrus was about to utter something

when Wishbone slammed his heel against the skinny man's shins.

"If yuh lose, yuh pay us a thousan' dollars an' let us go outa Utopia free an' easy, sabe? An' yuh withdraw yore application fer the sheriff's office. Waal?"

"It's a go, dang yuh," yelped Faro Jack, his eyes gleaming. "Pervidin' the sheriff is agreeable to the terms. Waal, Gates?"

"I agrees an' promises to see both parties abides by thar words, yep," said the puzzled sheriff.

"Hawgs!" roared a citizen. "Hawgs beatin' Faro's roosters. Haw-w-w! The danged stage robber is loco!"

"Yuh li'l idjut!" howled Walrus.

"Yuh pore misguided gopher. Hawgs! They cain't run as fast as a turtle. Da-a-a-ang!" And the gangly cowpoke staggered away groping for the door.

"One more thing, yuh cusses!" suddenly exploded Wishbone. "Race to be held ternight, startin at five-thirty. Begins in front of the saloon an' finishes two miles up the road."

"Agreed!" And the confident Faro Jack Sells hurried away, his gambling instinct drowning out every shred of caution. Hawgs beatin' his roosters, haw-w-w-w-w-w-w!

"Yuh ain't got no chancet, yuh li'l polecat!" argued the sheriff to Wishbone as he followed him out. "Them roosters—"

"Mebbe I ain't," retorted the little man, unperturbed, "but don't bet on it, nope! Hawgs kin run if yuh coax 'em. An' I been talkin' a heap with Myrtle an' now I craves to orate with her pa. Reckon I'll foller yuh whar we cain't be heerd."

FIVE-FIFTEEN. The entire populace of Utopia and environs herded together in the main street and waited for the great event. Faro Jack Sells and two cronies each held a racing rooster and waited for Wishbone to show up with his entries. Walrus stood leaning against a post, a picture of dejection that no artist could possibly paint. His mournful countenance stretched longer and longer as he watched the expression on the gambler's face.

Faro Jack, in fact, was more than confident. His roosters had never been beaten. That cache out in the wilds should be a sizable one in view of the fact that this pair of jaspers were hold-up men. And then from down the street came curses as protesting grunts and painful oink-oinks broke the expectant air. The crowd split and then howled as the bowlegged man drove a pair of hogs toward the saloon. The porkers were a long way from being trained to the pink and it was apparent that their owner had fed them only too well. Faro Jack grinned as the hogs were corralled and held in leash by accommodating citizens. The sheriff stepped out of the crowd and held up a hand.

"Stakes mus' be perduced afore the race," he announced. "Watters has handed me the locashun of his luker cache an' has turned over his nags. Faro, I asks yuh fer a thousan' dollars."

"Shore," and Faro drew a wad of legal tender from his pocket.

"Ready!" said the sheriff. "Git yore critters on the line!"

"H a w - w - w - w! haw-w-w-w!" howled the citizenry as Wishbone took a position fifty yards up the street with a sack of evil-smelling garbage donated by the owner of the Utopia Dining Palace. Faro Jack, mounted on his horse with a sack of corn at his saddle, drew abreast of Wishbone and grinned.

"Ready!" yelled Sheriff Gates just as Myrtle ran to Wishbone and wished him luck.

"He'll need a dang' lot more'n luck," groaned Walrus and then even he had to grin as Wishbone dropped a choice piece of garbage to the street. Faro Jack spoke to his roosters and flipped a few grains of corn to the street. The roosters uttered a joyful *patois* of their own and sped forward. The pigs grunted, sniffed and

waddled to the garbage. Wishbone continued on up the street and dropped another tempting morsel. Faro Jack loped away and the roosters, looking to a banquet, caught up with their owner, setting a pace that brought gasps of astonishment from the watching Utopians.

"Cripes!" uttered Walrus as he moved with the public. "The dang' pigs woudn' ketch up with 'em in a millyun years. Of all the—"

At the three-quarter mile mark, with the sun lowering swiftly in the west, Faro Jack's roosters were well out in front and to all intents and purposes had already sewed up the race. While Utopia bent double with paroxysms of mirth, Wishbone swore and pleaded with the hogs to show some interest in their work. They took their time about gobbling up the enticing garbage, then more time to continue on to the next banquet, and so on and on.

"Giss yuh're licked," shouted Gates as Faro Jack and his fowl disappeared over the brow of a hill. Wishbone grinned and looked at the sun which was nearly all the way below the horizon. "Don't bet on it, Sheriff, dang yuh, an' don't forgit to git yore coyotes in a bunch when this danged race is over." And the little man held out the sack to the pigs, let them whiff at it, then folded up the bag and led them on.

"Yuh danged li'l fool!" yipped Walrus, slipping out of the crowd to Wishbone's side. "Yuh're beat awready, yuh—"

"Mebbe, yuh ol' totempole," replied Wishbone intrepidly. "Wait ontil we gits over the brow of the hill an' I'll show yuh some hawse sense." He paused and listened. "Danged if I don't hear some cussin' right now. Haw-w-w! C'mon, hawgs, pilgrim!" And he helped one of them along with the toe of his boot.

OVER the hill, on the heels of Wishbone's hogs, the citizens of Utopia came upon a scene that struck them dumb and then exploded them with hilarity. This time, however, the laugh was on Faro Jack. Walrus jumped up and down and threw his hat high into the air. Myrtle ran to her father and the Gates family embraced. Standing in the road, swearing and sweating, was Faro Jack. At intervals the gambler would stoop to pick up a handful of rocks and toss them violently into the branches of the trees bordering the road. And up in said branches sat the trio of racing roosters who had retired with the sun. It was their bedtime and racing hogs would have to wait.

"Hawse sense, yuh li'l wart!" yipped Walrus as he slapped Wishbone on the back. "Yuh shore is satcherated with the stuff. Haw!" And he kept pace with his partner as the little man led the hogs on. They grunted as they swept past Faro Jack and on to their goal a half mile beyond. The gambler exhausted his supply of breath and rocks but still the roosters were adamant and stayed in retirement. Utopia cheered and laughed as it ushered Wishbone and the winning hogs over the finish line. Congratulations were being showered on the bow-legged man when the gambler and half a dozen of his cronies, bristling with six-guns, stamped to the scene. However, Sheriff Gates, being genuine, had stuck to his word. The gambler found himself facing a half moon of fairminded citizens with the sheriff in front of them.

"That's fer enough to step," warned the sheriff. "Reckon yuh're beat fa'r an' squar' an' yuh'll stick by the agreement. Reckon Watters was right, Faro. He beat yuh with hawse sense an' not hawgs. Yuh oughta know'd them roosters would go to roost on yuh when the sun went down. I have paid him over the prize money an' him an' his pard will git free exit from Utopia—of course after they have been guests at my wickiup fer supper. As fer as 'em bein' stage robbers, waal—"

"Yuh better explain it, dang yuh,

Gates," stormed Faro Jack. "Reckon yuh better let Napoleon Winkley tell his story an' then if all these buzzards wants a sheriff what has t'frame a—"

"Stick 'em up, Faro!" snapped Wishbone suddenly, his fingers drawing a gun from the holster of a man beside him. "I been lookin' over this luker I won from yuh. Mebbe yuh didn't know it but a hombre that druv the stage tol' Sheriff Gates hyar that he had copied down some numbers from some of the bills he was carryin' 'bout a month ago an' they was stole like he expecked an' he turned the numbers over to Gates. Waal, I reckon we got the leader of the coyotes what has been holdin' up the stage! Thar's some bills hyar, Faro, thet—"

"Dang yuh, yuh——!" Faro's face turned a sickly green and he looked beseechingly toward his companions. However, those hombres were piling their guns in a heap in the road at the request of Sheriff Gates. Faro Jack swore and gave up the ghost.

"An' as fer as Napoleon's story goes, feller citizens!" shouted Wishbone to the assemblage, "it was all a part of our scheme. Mine an' my pard's, the sheriff's and Myrtle's. We suspicioned this danged tin-horn gambler all the time, huh Napoleon?" And he winked at the town nitwit.

"Shore," chuckled the moon-faced man. "Hee-hee! Shore!"

"Oh-h! You're wonderful, Mister Watters!" gurgled Myrtle, linking her arm proudly in Wishbone's and looking up into the face of her still bewildered father. "Isn't he wonderful, pa?"

"Shore!" agreed Sheriff Gates. "A hombre with hawse sense."

"An' as much as it pizens me to admit it," orated Walrus, "them's my sentiments. Le's git a drink!"

And Utopia cheered.

Another " Walrus and Wishbone" story next issue

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Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

HOWDY, FOLKS. Shuck them six-irons an' get ready for the talkin' ruckus. This meetin' looks like it is gonna be plumb important. Clyde A. Warden is here to tell you-all somethin' about Bert Little. An' that well-known writin' waddie Stephen Payne is gonna be here. Also, hombres an' hombresses, there is another jasper what's gonna be here—an ornery cuss that you'll be glad to see with us again.

All right, pards, here's Clyde Warden. If you don't know him, you oughta.

Let 'er buck, Clyde.

Hello, Friends:

I have traveled some in my time. I've seen and known all of the states west of the Mississippi; and most of them east of that muddy, mighty stream. And there has been times when I've met with trouble that proved almost too much for me to handle. One of these times I will recount to you and I will tell you of a man who has meant an almighty lot to me since the day I first met him.

It happened in a little, sun-scorched Southwest town; no matter the name, because it does not bring back exactly pleasant memories to me, nor to others, either, I think. I dropped off the struggling, jolting train at the station of that little mountain town. And it was like dropping into a pot boiling with trouble. A man does not usually expect the money in his pocket to lead him into trouble, but that was exactly what happened to me. I had too much for that part of the country—at that time, anyway. I found soon that the bank in the adjoining township had been robbed the night before, the banker murdered and around a thousand dollars taken. That was a few hundred more than I had, but for these townsmen it was close enough to fit the robbery. They were tracing down suspects and there was murder in the back of all their minds, for that banker had been pretty much of a favorite to all of them. Well, they nailed me the moment I dropped from the train, for in what part of the country will they pass up a stranger when trouble is astir? They searched me and found the money, all in bills. And then they sent up a cry like a pack of bloodhounds that have caught the scent. Would they listen to anything I had to tell them? Not a bit of it! Would they take me to the jail and give me a fair court trial? I was about as sure of that as a mouse is its life when it has been caught between the paws of a cat. They had liked

the banker and they wanted someone's life to pay for his. So they took me out to the end of the station and threw a rope over a good strong cross bar. They put the rope around my neck and I was getting myself ready to look into the next world. And I tell you, it isn't a very pleasant thing, standing with a rope around your neck and waiting to be jerked into eternity. It's a pretty sinking feeling to look around at a mob of scowling faces and see no whit of sympathy or mercy in any of them. It's enough to make a man get down to some serious thinking. For what is worse than dying for some other man's crime? But I was to have a moment's respite. The leader of the group, an evil visaged scoundrel who had placed the rope on my neck and now stood ready to jerk me upward, turned to his followers.

"Is there any of you here gotta reason why he shouldn't swing?" he growled, harshly.

And then another voice spoke up. It was a slow, Kentucky drawl and in that moment it was more like music to me than any I have ever heard.

"Aye," said that voice, gently. "I reckon there's plenty reason why he shouldn't."

I twisted my head around with a start, for I knew that voice. I looked around and there in the shadows on the fringe of the crowd I saw him. He sat upon the back of a mighty and majestic stallion. A great dog had stopped beside him. The man was smiling with a slight, half-twist of his lips. Here, when I had fully expected to die, had come salvation. For here was the man whom I have later called Bert Little! Still smiling, he dismounted and came forward. "Aye," he repeated. "I reckon this has gotta stop."

"It has, eh?" snarled the man who held the rope. "An' why? Why should we listen to you? Mebbe you was in on it with him! Come on, men! Let's string up the both of them!"

"That would be nice, if it could happen," smiled the Kentuckian, with his slow, calm drawl. "It'd suit you just about right, wouldn't it—Simmeral?"

That name acted like a thing of magic upon the man. He started backward with a growl of rage, his face paling. He dropped the rope from his hand. He crouched for a tense, brief moment. And then his hand swept gunward. But where is a man who could have stood a chance with he whom I have called Bert Little? The flame from his Colt warmed my cheek as it leaped past me. But Simmeral buckled and slid forward upon his face, a dead man. Little turned.

"There's the man you gents want," he drawled slowly. "I trailed him here. You look him over an' you'll find the money all right, I reckon."

They found the full amount about Simmeral's person and I was freed. And once again I had full reason to call the great Bert Little a friend with all the meaning of the word.

CLYDE A. WARDEN.

Thanks, Clyde. We o' the "Stampede" are sure glad to have you with us again. That sure was an interestin' story 'bout you an' Bert Little. Many thanks for comin'. Jus' hunker down, pard, an' make yourself plumb to home . . . .

I reckon you hombres an' hombresses ain't been keepin' your eyes open for that stray jasper who rides under the brand o' Gunter Griffin. He ain't showed up yet at the home corral. Anyway, if you-all see him, tell him that Powder River Bill wants to palaver.

Now here's a red-headed hombress with a question.

Step right up, Miss Red.

Me—Powder River Bill

WILL PAY ONE DOLLAR

for every hunk of interestin' information 'bout the West that is orated at comin' STAMPEDES.

If you-all send in stuff that ain't no good or has been orated before I'm gonna chuck it right back to you. An' if you don't send an addressed an' stamped envelope I'll chuck it in the basket. Savvy?

Mail everything to

STAMPEDE

WESTERN TRAILS
67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

R. R. 2,
Plainfield, Illinois.

Howdy Bill:

Here I am—yes sir, just finished reading the September number of WESTERN TRAILS. Gee-gosh it was interesting.

Say Bill, where'd you get them brains of yours? I sure get some great kicks out of the "Stampede."

Oh, by the way, how about some Pen Pards, eh? I'm just crazy about receiving letters and I'll answer 'em too. I'm a red-headed gal, 5 ft. 4 in., blue eyes and I'm very fond of riding horses, better than any other sports.

I'll always be a friend of WESTERN TRAILS, even when I'm in my second childhood.

LEONA "RED" PILS.

Sure glad you liked that September issue, Miss Red. An' you wanta know where I got my brains? Shucks—well, I'm a modest jasper, Miss Red. Lissen, you jus' walk over to the Pen Pards bunkhouse—then order a bigger mail box. I'll be seein' yuh, Miss Red . . . .

Shove over, waddies, here's a newcomer to "Stampede." But you-all have read his stories. The brand is Stephen Payne, one of our leadin' cowboy authors. Meet Steve, folks. He's got a few words to say to you-all.

C'mon, Steve.

Howdy, Pards:

"Stampede." That means a wild run. So I'll just hit the high spots. I like to write stories about the West because I know it and I love it. One small writer can barely scratch the surface of the glamour, romance and adventure to be found in the mighty mountains, the fertile prairies and parks and the vast deserts. Tremendously large place, this West. I tell mostly about Colorado and Wyoming because I know them best.

A native of Colorado, I was raised on the ranch and range. Began riding as quick as I was able to crawl on a "hoss". Like the rest of the kids, there weren't many then, that attended school in a little log school house, I had an ambition to be a top bronc rider—tophand cowboy. I was range ridin' at thirteen and helping on roundups and with trail herds shortly afterwards. So I grew up with horses and cows and finally did get to be a pretty good hand. I've done everything there is to do around a cow outfit from cooking and wrangling horses to bossing said outfit. Even owned a ranch of my own and a herd of dogies.

In those days—not so long ago either—I never had time to do something I always had a hankering to do, namely write. Got around to it at last though. Refused to be discouraged in the face of a lot of mighty discouraging things, so gradually began landing some of my tales and learning the ropes of a new game. I'm no longer punching cows, but I'm living things I've been through all over again every time I turn out a western story. And if I can get on paper just a little of the allure, glamour, romance and adventure that there is in the lives of our cowboys, well and good. So long.

STEPHEN PAYNE.

Many thanks, pard. Right nice o' you to drop in. The hombres an' hombresses here sure like to meet the boys who rod the ole W. T. spread. Make yourself to home, Steve.

The next jasper to orate is Ralph from over West Virginia way. Ralph has plenty on his mind.

1408 8th Street,
Moundsville, W. Va.

Hello Bill:

I got my second copy of WESTERN TRAILS today and think it's great. I like those new pictures and history of old Western characters. All of the stories in W. T. are good. The authors are great.

Another feature about W. T. is the stories are complete in every copy. Bill, how about one of them pictures of you. I won't laff at it. Hoping W. T. is always as good as it is now.

Truly yours,

RALPH CROW.

Gosh, Ralph, you-all sure did get off some mighty good ear music. An' I'm glad you like those new pictures of the lives of old Western characters. Let us know how you like this one—"Old Joe Meek, the first Western Sheriff"? Don't be a stranger, Ralph, an' we'll sure keep the writin' waddies on the job. All right, pard, you asked for it. Watch the mail box for the picture o' Yores Trooley.

Now we hear from an old timer to the W. T. outfit.

Talk up, Stan.

Salina, Pa.

Dear Bill:

WESTERN TRAILS is getting better every month and the Bert Little stories are getting better every month. "Renegade Range" was great and I sure did like the life of "Billy the Kid" in pictures.

"Hell-Cat Hardigan," "A Pair of Sixes" and "Lucky Lead" were fine, also including "Buzzards' Ballots."

I hope the authors keep up this great work for it is excellent.

Yours truly,

STANLEY POVLAK,
Box 213.

P. S. Don't forget to send me a picture of your quite handsome face and here is my ballot.

Yes, siree. You sure know what you like, Stan—an' as I jus' told Ralph here, I'll keep them yarn-wranglin' hombres ridin' close herd. An' what I said to Ralph 'bout that

picture, goes again. You're a brave hombre, Stan. See yuh soon . . . .

Here's a curly-haired hombress what wants to know if there's room for her to tie-up at the hitchrack. If there ain't—I'll build another hitchrack.

Step right up, Miss Viola. You're plumb welcome to this here outfit.

806 West St.,
Carthage, N. Y.

Howdy Bill:

The lady next door let me take a magazine and it happened to be WESTERN TRAILS. Boy, there sure are swell stories in them.

I like them better than any magazine I have ever read.

Well, I hope to read more of them in the future.

Tell Charlie I said "Hello."

I hope I marked the ballot right. If you want me to I will describe myself. Well, here goes.

I am five feet three and a half. Have brown curly hair and blue eyes.

Some call me good looking. But I tell them not to kid me. Hope there's a corner there for me so I can hitch up.

Yours truly,
VIOLA MILLER.

You know, Miss Viola, it sure makes these writin' waddies feel good to know that they're doin' somethin' that you an' the other hombres an' hombresses take a hankerin' to. Yup, truer words ain't been orated. You did a good job on that ballot, pard. Many thanks. But before you go over to the Pen Pards bunkhouse, I wanta ask you somethin'. Do you hear any funny noises in the chuck tent. Does it sound to you like our long lost Dishpan Charlie? Hmmm. Well, hurry back, Miss Viola, this meetin' is due for a surprise . . . .

Shove over, waddies. Here's a sailor hombre with an offer for you-all.

All right, sailor, an' as I once heard some admiral blat—front an' center.

Dear Bill:

Just dropping you a line or two to let you know that I have been reading WESTERN TRAILS for the last year or so, and am letting you know that they sure hit the spot plumb center with a kick like one of these here 16 inch guns on this wagon that I was on up until just about two weeks ago. They call it the United States Battleship Colorado.

You may guess that I am a sailor which I sure am. I've been sailing the last eight years and have two more years to go to be discharged once again—which will make the third time.

Have been around the old globe three and a half times and can tell anything anyone wishes to know about this little world that we live in. So please rope some of them fast ink-slingers my way.

Wishing you all my luck in the world for a bigger and better WESTERN TRAILS.

I remain a reader until the ocean goes dry.

Best Wishes to WESTERN TRAILS again.

M. J. YONCHER,
U. S. S. Chicago,
c/o San Francisco, Calif.

P. S. I am 5 ft. 6 in. tall, dark brown hair, blue eyes. Weight 140 lbs. And am quick on a fountain pen.

That sure was a mighty nice offer, friend. I'm sure there's a-plenty o' hombres an' hombresses who want to hear 'bout this little ole world from a jasper what's been around himself. Tell that admiral o' yours to get a bigger mail box on his battle boat. Come again, pard . . . .

Cowpokes, you-all have a chance here to save a hombress from fallin' off a chair. S'fact. Lissen to Miss Bernice here.

4042 N. Meade Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

Hi, Bill:

I was so gosh durn interested in WESTERN TRAILS that I forgot to do my housework and was almost minus a magazine on account of it.

I'm just achin' for some Pen Pards from 14 up. I would like some real cowpunchers to write to me. As it is I'm sittin' on the edge of the chair waitin' for some letters, and if they don't come in a hurry I might fall off. I'm not much of a writer but I'll try my best.

Sincerely,
BERNICE HOYER.

Well, Miss Bernice, I sure reckon these cow-crammers won't let you get bucked off that chair. A lot of 'em know what it is to be lonely. Come around next meetin', friend, an' tell us-all how you like the stories in this here issue. Be seein' yuh . . . .

Whoa! Jus' lookit these soldier lads. Three-four of 'em.

Make yourselves plumb to home, pards, we sure are a-lissenin'.

Battery "A" 64th C. A. (A.A).
Fort Shafter, T. H.

Powder River Bill:

We, my Buddies and myself, have been reading WESTERN TRAILS the last two years and we are convinced that your magazine can't be beat for good clean stories of the West.

We especially like Bert Little's stories the best and "Hell's Bend" was second. Your magazine isn't published often enough for us. We would like to see your magazine at least twice a month. It is sure some comedy to see the battle royal that the men in the battery stage when your magazine arrives.

We are over here in Hawaii and quite a way from home, at times it gets mighty lonesome, so if you will publish this little note of appreciation in your magazine and help us get some Pen Pards, we promise faithfully to answer all letters in order in which they arrive.

So come on, girls and boys, write and we will answer all questions about the "Tourists Paradise" of the Pacific.

Sincerely yours,
CPL. SAM C. BEASLEY,
CPL. WALLACE W. DEPRIEST,
CPL. JOHN W. DAVIS,
PFC. JACOB J. WILD.

Well, soldiers, all I gotta orate is that you better ask Uncle Sam to give you-all some time off for writin' duty. Anyway, you-all come back first chance you get. An', by the way, there's some Pen Pard hombresses right here at this meetin'—start off writin' to them. *Adios* . . . .

"The Terrible Twins" will talk to you-all next. They sure have plenty to say.

Andover, Maine

Dear Bill:

I have read several of your wonderful mags and am going to read more.

My pal and I would like a few Pen Pards. Won't you try and get this printed in your next issue of WESTERN TRAILS?

My pal Marguerite or "Peggie" as she is most generally called is fifteen yrs. old, has dark hair and brown eyes.

As for myself I am seventeen years old. Have auburn hair that is naturally curly, and brown eyes. We love all kinds of outdoor sports. We are known as "The Twins" or "Terrible Twins" because we are always seen together and really are terrible. Here's wishing success to all your wonderful mags.

So long,
MISS CLARA MANZER,
Lock Box 21.
MISS MARGUERITE CAMPBELL,
Box 76.

P.S. Would like awfully well to hear from C. B. and U. B. from Marnin, Mo. We want boys and girls from all over the world to write, cause we are lonesome. So come on!

M. C.

Hi, Twins. That sure was an interestin' speech. I reckon if all these hombres ain't scairt to death o' your terror, they will wrangle some pencils. Let us hear from you again, Twins. *Adios, senoritas* . . . .

Now, folks, that noise you heard in the chuck tent was made by none other than our own Dishpan Charlie! Yup, Charlie has come home! But the ornery idjut won't say nothin' about where he was. No amount o' palaver will open that clam trap o' his.

Yeow! Here comes Charlie now! Jus' lookit that silk shirt he's a-wearin'! Never seen its like from Montana to Mex City. Some blue, eh? An' all them pearl buttons! They look like stars in a cold desert night. Anyway, if Charlie won't open his mouth to tell us where he's been—it sure looks like he's gonna open his mouth to sing!

C'mon, Dishpan! The hombres an' hombresses are waitin' to hear you shout down the cows. Let 'er go, you ole ki-oyte.

Oh, the prairie dogs are screaming,
And the birds are on the wing.
See the heel fly chase the heifer, boys!
'Tis the first class sign of spring.
The elm wood is budding
The earth is turning green.
See the pretty things of nature
That makes life a pleasant dream.

The cook is at his chuck tent
Whistlin' "Heifers in the Green,"
Makin' bakin' powder biscuits, boys,
While the pot is biling beans.
The boys untie their beddin'
And unroll it on the run,
For they are in a monstrous hurry
For the supper almost done.

"Here's your bloody wolf bait,"
Cried the cook's familiar voice
As he climbed the wagon wheel
To watch the cowboys all rejoice.
Then all thoughts were turned from reverence
To a plate of beef an' beans,
As we gaze on beef an' biscuits
Like yearlin's on the range.

To the dickens with your city
Where they herd the stuffy yaps,
On a range so badly crowded
There ain't room to cuss a cat.
The life is not so sumptuous,
I'm longin' for a change.
For there is no place so homelike
As a cow camp on the range.

Thanks, Dishpan. That sure was good. But I can't figger why you walked out on all of us folks like you did. Shucks, you had us nigh ready to fork the war path plumb into Los Angeles. What? You got reasons for keepin' your trap closed? All right, you ole flea-bitten prairie dog—I'll get it out of you before the next meetin'—yes, siree!

George here has something to tell you-all.

Stampede:

This is only the second WESTERN TRAILS I have had the pleasure of reading but as long as my eyes stay put, I am going to keep on. I was born and raised in the East, but I hope to soon make my home in the West. When I am reading WESTERN TRAILS I practically live out West. The stories I have read so far can't be beat. Bert Little is at the head of the list and the rest are seconds. I wonder if there is a chance to put another Pen Pard on the list? I am out of work and have plenty of time to write. Well I wish you lots more luck and more sales.

Yours truly,

GEORGE POMROY,
Box 152,
Fort Washington, Pa.

P. S. Enclosed stamped envelope for reply.

Sure glad you like W. T., waddie. An' for your Pen Pards—you amble out across the ranchyard an' sign up.

Meantime, if any o' you cowpokes hear o' a ranch bein' short a hand, jus' tell 'em that George is lookin' for work. Friend George gave his address here, so get in touch with him *muy pronto* . . . .

WELL, hombres and hombresses, here is the ballot I want you-all to fill in. It is a quick an' easy way to tell me what writers you vote into First, Second and Third place. Jus' mark a "1"—"2"—"3" in the empty box beside the author an' his story.

See yuh next meetin', an' we'll see if Dishpan Charlie is ready to tell his story.

TOPHAND AUTHOR'S BALLOT

WESTERN TRAILS

67 West 44th Street **New York, N. Y.**

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paid by Music Publishers and Talking Picture Producers. Free booklet describes most complete song service ever offered. Hit writers will revise, arrange, compose music to your lyrics or lyrics to your music, secure U. S. Copyright, broadcast your song over the radio. Our Sales Department submits to Music Publishers and Hollywood Picture Studios. WRITE TODAY for full information.

UNIVERSAL SONG SERVICE
652 Meyer Bldg., Western Ave. and Sierra Vista, Hollywood, Calif.

Getting Up

Nights Lowers Vitality

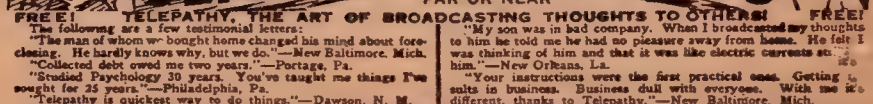
If you feel old and run-down from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Stiffness, or Burning, caused by Kidney Acidity, use quick-acting Cystex (Sistex). Often shows big improvement in 24 hours. Guaranteed to satisfy completely or return empty box and get money back. Only 75c at druggists.

STOMACH TROUBLE

Thousands of sufferers, many cases of years standing, after using the Udga Treatment report amazing recovery. The Udga Treatment is highly recommended for Ulcers, severe chronic Gastritis, Acidosis, Dyspepsia, Indigestion caused by hyperacidity or faulty diet. **30 day trial** with DEFINITE GUARANTEE of SATISFACTION or **Money Refunded.** WRITE for **FREE** valuable book on Stomach Sicknesses and letters of praise from former sufferers. Also **$1,000.00 Reward guaranteeing** that these testimonials were voluntarily sent in.. **Write Today!**

UDGA, INCORPORATED 1200 Dakota Bldg., St. Paul, Minn.

FREE BOOK ON TELEPATHY, ASTROLOGY, HEALTH AND SELF BETTERMENT



FREE! TELEPATHY, THE ART OF BROADCASTING THOUGHTS TO OTHERS! FREE!

The following are a few testimonial letters:

"The man of whom we bought home changed his mind about foreclosing. He hardly knows why, but we do."—New Baltimore, Mich.

"Collected debt owed me two years."—Portage, Pa.

"Studied Psychology 30 years. You've taught me things I've sought for 25 years."—Philadelphia, Pa.

"Telepathy is quickest way to do things."—Dawson, N. M.

"My son was in bad company. When I broadcasted my thoughts to him he told me he had no pleasure away from home. He felt I was thinking of him and that it was like electric currents st... him."—New Orleans, La.

"Your instructions were the first practical ones. Getting results in business. Business dull with everyone. With me it's different, thanks to Telepathy."—New Baltimore, Mich.

If you want to know more about TELEPATHY, THE ART OF BROADCASTING THOUGHTS, then send for our free booklet that is causing a sensation among men and women. This booklet also contains other sections referring to Astrology, Health, Self Betterment, and the discovery of a Mighty Law, the enormous powers of which will amaze you. This booklet will be sent to you FREE of charge or obligation.

PATY CO., 618 SOUTH WESTERN AVE., DEPT. A-3 **LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**

Please mention MAN STORY MAGAZINES *when answering advertisements.*

LDG

DRAWING *turns* INK *to* GOLD

THE small crude sketch (1) was drawn by Herschel Logan before he had Federal School training. The large drawing of Lincoln (2) shows his recent work. Note the improvement. Today his drawings are seen in National Exhibits. Recently he made $100.00 over his regular monthly salary. He says, "Any average fellow with the same instruction should be able to accomplish similar if not greater results."

Many Earn $500 Monthly

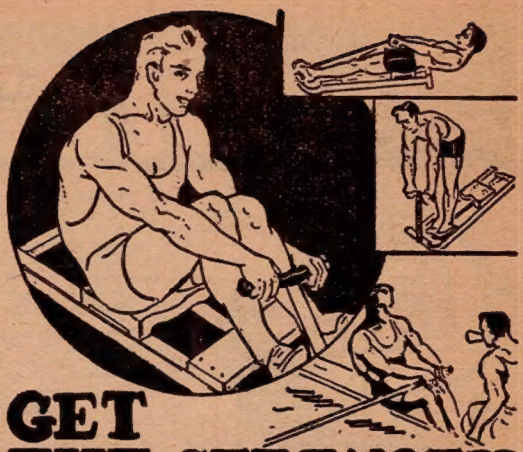
Opportunities for artists have never been better. Publishers pay millions for illustrations every year. The Federal Home Study Course has been prepared by over fifty of the Nation's leading artists. If you like to draw, cash in on your talent. It's easy to learn the "Federal Way." You may have talent lying dormant in you, just as Logan had. Our Vocational Art Test will find that out. Send your name, address, age and occupation and we will send you the chart free. Act today.

Federal School of Illustrating

11441 Federal School Bldg., Minneapolis, Minn.

CRIME DETECTION
SECRET SERVICE AND FINGER PRINTS
SECRET SERVICE BOOK
Sent FREE
For 30 Days Reading
No Money Down—Actual Crime Cases—
If You Act Quick!—We will send you this stirring book on Crime Detection, Secret Service and Identification Work for 30 days free reading. Send no money. If you decide to keep it, then send only $1.00. If not, return it. WRITE TODAY. Not sent to boys under 17 years of age.
T. G. Cooke, Book Dept. 68-78 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Chicago

EXTRA STRONG
IMPROVED MODEL
COPPER BOILER
Catalog Free
SOLID CAST NO SCREW TOP
HEAVY COPPER
5 Gallon ... $ 6.50
7 ... 8.85
10 ... 11.90
15 ... 14.20
20 ... 18.50
25 ... 22.50
30 ... 27.50
SAVE 20% NOW!
Most Practical Boiler & Cooker
Made with large 5-inch Improved Cap and Spout. Safe, practical and simple. Nothing to get out of order, most substantial and durable on the market. Will last a lifetime, gives real service and satisfaction.
Easily Cleaned
Cap removed in a second; no burning of hands. An ideal low pressure boiler and pasteurizer for home and farm.
Save 20% by ordering direct from factory. No article of such high quality and utility ever sold at such amazingly low prices. Prices quoted are cash with order or one-fourth cash, balance C. O. D. Send check or money order; prompt shipment made in plain strong box. The only boiler worth having. Large Catalog Free.
HOME MANUFACTURING CO.
Dept. 7910
18 E. Kinzie St.
Chicago, Illinois



GET THE STRENGTH OF AN OARSMAN

A Gym at Home to Make You Strong

Be Strong! Enjoy the thrill giant strength gives to the varsity oarsman. He must be "there" to stand the strain and endure the greatest and most terrific strength test put to any athlete. If you want massive shoulders—a mighty chest—arms like iron—a powerful back—legs like pillars of steel, and an all around perfect athlete's body—stop dreaming—wake up! The invention of the VIG-ROW is the answer to your dream. The VIG-ROW was created and built by a man who built his own body from a weakling to that of a champion. The VIG-ROW offers body-building principles never revealed to the public before—the perfect device for keeping fit and getting strong. Be sure to investigate the VIG-ROW. You will agree that it is the greatest and most perfect rowing machine ever marketed, regardless of price. Its many features and beauty will amaze you. Send no money—write now for additional free information.

Examine the VIG-ROW First

Space doesn't permit the entire story about the VIG-ROW. There are too many reasons why you should select the VIG-ROW. We don't ask you to purchase from this advertisement—we do ask that you write for our large photographic circular and realize the difference yourself. Write for free facts now. Don't buy now from us or anyone else—compare—examine—test—don't buy a cat in the bag—write us now and get the wonderful complete VIG-ROW story.

EXCLUSIVE VIG-ROW FEATURES

- Inclined Frame
- Sliding, Form-Fitting Aluminum Seat
- Progressive Exercise Springs—Instantly Adjustable
- Arch-Supporting Foot-Rest—Aluminum Front
- Noiseless Rubber Wheels—Oilless Bearings

Free Instructions

We don't think it enough just to sell you the finest rowing machine in the world and trust to luck that you will use it and get strong. We furnish a course of instruction, without extra cost, that is complete in every detail, showing how to develop every part of the body with the VIG-ROW—prepared and written by a master of physical culture.

$11.85

And it's your's free—If you write at once.

Rush Coupon!

Don't send a cent! Fill in coupon and mail. Full details free by return mail.

AMERICAN athletic APPLIANCE COMPANY
239 Broadway, Dept. 1611, New York City

Please send absolutely free and without obligation, full details about your wonderful VIG-ROW rowing machine. Also reserve one of those free instruction courses. I have checked plan of purchase that interests me, if I decide to purchase a VIG-ROW.

☐ Cash Price ☐ Installment Plan

Name ..... Age .....

Street .....

City ..... State .....

Please print or write plainly

The Greatest Sin

Must every woman pay the price of a moment's happiness in bitter tears and years of regret? Must millions of homes be ruined—lovers and sweethearts driven apart—marriages totter to the brink of divorce—the sacred joys of sex relations be denied? YES—Just as long as men and women remain ignorant of the simple facts of life.

The Greatest Sin of all is total IGNORANCE of the most important subject in the life of every man and woman—SEX.

AWAY WITH FALSE MODESTY!

Let us face the facts of sex fearlessly and frankly, sincerely and scientifically. Let us tear the veil of shame and mystery from sex and build the future of the race on a new knowledge of all the facts of sex as they are laid bare in plain, daring but wholesome words, and frank pictures in the huge new library of Sex Knowledge.

"MODERN EUGENICS"

39 Chapters—Startling Illustrations

This volume abounds in truthful illustrations and pictures of scientific interest that one seldom, if ever, finds outside of the highly technical medical books which laymen fail to understand. Every picture is true to life.

544 Pages of SECRETS

Everything a Married Woman Should Know—

How to hold a husband
How to have perfect children
How to preserve youth
Warding off other women
Keeping yourself attractive
Why husbands tire of wives
Dreadful diseases due to ignorance
Diseases of women
Babies and birth control
Twilight sleep—easy childbirth
How babies are conceived
Diseases of children
Family health guide
Change of life—hygiene
Why children die young
Inherited traits and diseases
What will you tell your growing girl?
The mystery of twins
Hundreds of valuable remedies
Nursing and weaning
How to care for invalids

Girls—Don't Marry before you know all this—

The dangers of petting
How to be a vamp
How to manage the honeymoon
What liberties to allow a lover
Secrets of the wedding nights
Beauty diets and baths
Do you know—
How to attract desirable men
How to manage men
How to know if he loves you
How to acquire bodily grace and beauty
How to beautify face, hands, hair, teeth and feet
How to acquire charm
How to dress attractively
Intimate personal hygiene
How to pick a husband

Secrets for Men—

Mistakes of early marriages
Secrets of fascination
Joys of perfect mating
How to make women love you
Bringing up healthy children
Fevers and contagious diseases
Accidents and emergencies
Hygiene in the home
Limitation of offspring
The sexual embrace
Warning to young men
Secrets of greater delight
Dangerous diseases
Secrets of sex attraction
Hygienic precautions
Anatomy and physiology
The reproductive organs
What every woman wants
Education of the family
Sex health and prevention

Important! This work will not be sold to minors. When ordering your book, state your age!

250,000 Sold

This huge volume of sales enables us to cut the cost of printing to $2.98 instead of $5.00. Would YOU risk your health and happiness for the sake of having $2.98 more in your pocket?—Of course not!

What Will You Tell Your Growing Child?

Will you let your children grow up in the same dangerous ignorance in which you yourself perhaps were reared—or will you guide them safely through puberty by the aid of this truly helpful book?

Cut Price Offer

PREFERRED PUBLICATIONS 911
56 West 45th St., New York City

Please send me "Modern Eugenics" SEALED in plain wrapper. I will pay $2.98 and postage to the postman on delivery, in accordance with your special half price offer. My age is .....

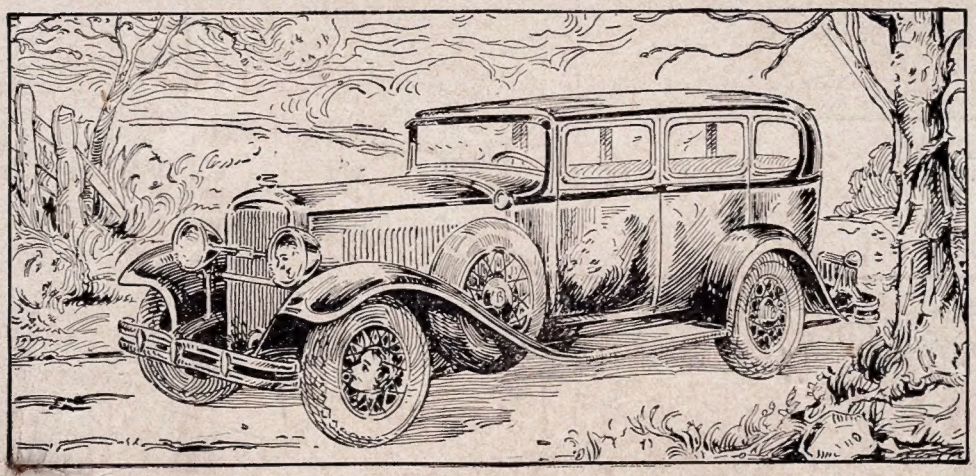
Name .....

Address .....

Orders from Foreign Countries must be accompanied by Express or Money Order of $3.45.

Win $3,700.00

OR BUICK 8 SEDAN AND $2,500 IN CASH



Can you find 5 faces in the picture?

Sensational money-making opportunity for everybody! You may win $3,700 if you prefer all cash or handsome latest model Buick 8 Sedan and $2,500 in cash. **This offer is made by a prominent business house for advertising purposes. Someone is going to win $3,700—why not you?**

I want to send you this prize. Act quick! Send your answer today and qualify to win.

All you do to qualify for an opportunity in this great cash prize advertising plan is to find five faces in picture.

People riding in the auto above got out of the car. Their faces are shown in odd places about the picture. Some faces are upside down, others look sideways, some look straight at you. If you can pick out 5 or more faces, mark them, clip the picture and send to me together with your name and address. Sharp eyes will find them. Can you?

Easy to Win $12,960.00 in 103 Cash Prizes

We will give away $12,960 in cash. You are sure to profit if you take an active part. In case of ties duplicate prizes will be given. **You get $3,700 if you win grand first prize.** In addition there are 102 other wonderful cash prizes. The winner of the grand second prize may win $2,200, and winner of the grand third prize may win $1,700. Also four other prizes of $500.00 each and many others. All told $12,960 in cash. Money to pay you is already on deposit in the Mercantile Trust and Savings Bank, a big Chicago Bank.

Indiana Farmer Wins $3,500!

This is a picture of Mr. C. H. Essig, Argos, Ind., taken on his farm. He writes: "Wish to acknowledge receipt of your $3,500 prize check. Oh, boy! This is the biggest sum of money I ever had in my hands. It is indeed a fortune to me."

Mrs. Kate Needham, of Oregon, won $4,705.00. Miss Serena Burbach, of Wisconsin, won $1,125. M. D. Reidman of Minnesota, won $2,560. Hundreds of men, women, boys and girls have been rewarded in our past advertising campaigns.

$1,000.00 for Promptness

Send your answer at once. Make sure to qualify for $1,000 extra given for promptness if you win the Buick Sedan—a total of $3,700 if you prefer all cash.

Send No Money The main thing is—send in your answer today. You can share in this advertising cash distribution. Hurry! and take no chance of losing the extra reward of $1,000 for promptness if you win grand first prize. Act now! You don't need to send a penny of your money to win! Just find five faces in the picture above and mail with coupon or write me a letter at once for particulars.

Send Coupon Today

ROGER SCOTT, Mgr.
427 W. Randolph St., Dept. 74, Chicago, Ill.

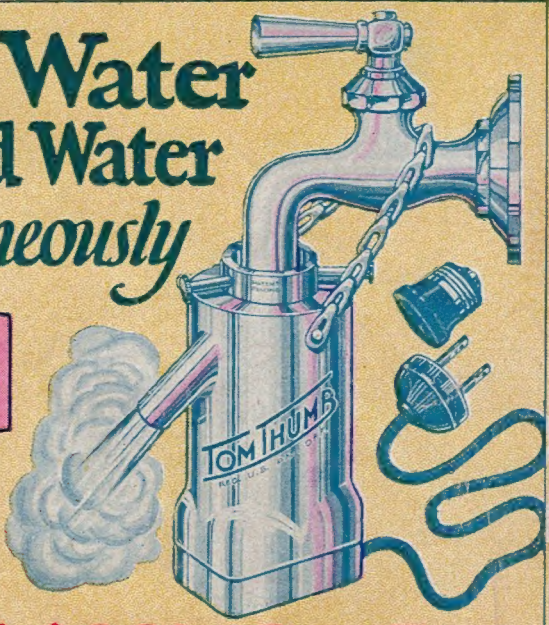
I have found five faces in the $3,700.00 prize picture and am anxious to win a prize. Please advise me how I stand.

Name.....

Address.....

Town.....State.....

Running Hot Water From Your Cold Water Faucet *Instantaneously*



Only $3.75 Complete

Agents! This Marvelous Invention Will Make Up to $40.00 a Day Easy

Just plug in at the nearest electric outlet and presto!—you have instantaneous, continuous running hot water from your cold water faucet. This tells you in a nutshell why the invention of the Tom Thumb automatic electric hot water heater will make it easy for you to make up to $40.00 a day.

The electric heated steaming hot water comes direct from the faucet instantaneously—yes, as quickly as you can turn on the current and the hot water runs indefinitely until you shut off the electricity. The cost is small—convenience is great. Useful wherever hot water is needed—no fuss or bother—attached to any faucet in a jiffy. Works on either AC or DC current. You and your customers will marvel and be delighted at this new discovery of electrical science. The small cost of $3.75 for the Tom Thumb, Junior (110 volts) or $5.75 for Tom Thumb, Senior (220 volts) does the work of any expensive hot water heating equipment costing several hundred dollars—the Tom Thumb absolutely eliminates the plumber or any other additional expense. Order direct from us. We are the originators, manufacturers, owners and patentees of the famous and original Tom Thumb electric hot water heater.

No Installation - Stick One On Faucet and Sale Is Made

Think of it! No installation, no extra expense—nothing else to do but to stick it on the faucet, turn on electricity and it is there ready for duty. Easily removed when not wanted and easily carried to any part of house where cold water is running and hot water is wanted. Has many uses—too numerous to mention here. Weighs only 1 lb., made entirely of aluminum. Cannot rust, no moving parts, nothing to get out of order.

If $40 A Day Sounds Good To You Rush Coupon

This new scientific invention offers tremendous sales possibilities. At the low price of $3.75 you should be able to sell at least 40 a day. You pocket $1.00 cash commission on every sale. If you would like to know all about this proposition, sign your name and address to coupon or, better still, get started selling at once. Attach money order for $2.75 to coupon and rush to us. We will send complete selling outfit containing 1 Tom Thumb electric hot water heater, order blanks, selling particulars and everything necessary to help you get started making up to $40.00 a day at once.

Terminal Products Co., Inc.
Dept. 511, 200 Hudson St.,
New York, N. Y.

The Tom Thumb electric hot water heater looks like a big money maker to me. I am sure interested in knowing how to make up to $40.00 a day with this proposition. I have checked below the proposition I am interested in at this moment.

☐ Enclosed find money order for $2.75. Please send me one Tom Thumb Junior, order blanks and selling information. It is understood upon receipt of this sample outfit I will be permitted to take orders and collect $1.00 cash deposit for every Tom Thumb, Jr. I sell, or $1.50 for every Tom Thumb, Sr. I sell. It is understood I will send the orders to you and you will ship direct to my customers C.O.D. for the balance.

☐ I would like to have additional information before acting as one of your agents. Please send this by return mail free of obligation.

Name .....

Street .....

City ..... State .....

Canadians please send cash with order at same price. Other foreign countries $1.00 extra for each unit cash with order.